

Busy Bee!

David Miller

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Chapter One: Wind-blown (Vayu Mudra)

This nameless road in eastern Nevada reminded George Nunce of a sketch line on a half-finished portrait.

“See, it goes all the way up,” George said to Mohandas “Mo” Spike. He was pointing into the distance of the onrushing Ruby Mountains. There, the sketch line disappeared into a winding pass. By then it was less a definitive pencil black and more a dotted gray vector. Perhaps there was snow up in the pass covering one of two lanes. Perhaps it was an illusion that would disappear upon the approach.

The road was nameless because it ran through federal property. The government didn’t see it as a throughway so much as a destination unto itself.

That is, one needed rarefied credentials to drive on it. Presumably, the possessors of such credentials didn’t need anything as common as a roadmap to know where they were headed. They would be assumed as individuals of supreme drive and foreknowledge. Or else they would have been shot on sight forty miles back at Checkpoint Alpha.

George and Mo were in an eastbound Econoline van. On the windshield’s inside, from the passenger seat, George began to dab at the sketch line with a damp thumb.

"I don't think a painter should ever reveal his secrets," he said to Mohandas. Then he turned his thumb over to see if a bit of the pencil marking was still there.

"Realize," he said, "some of the Old Masters, Vermeer maybe, were suspected of using a camera obscura to aid their drawing. With the camera obscura they would project an image onto the blank canvas and draw over it. Critics considered it cheating. But to me it isn't cheating. It's the end-product that should count, I think, not the process. If it's all just an illusion," George said, "then so what? An artist shouldn't have to defend his method. You shouldn't have to contemplate how an illusion is created."

Not that George Nunce was excessively concerned by the plight of the artist in the twenty-first century, but he thought that the creative process should remain enigmatic. He had come to this conclusion only having entered this unnamed Area's confines. Presently he thought that the enigma surrounding Art was all important. He thought that Art couldn't survive without it. He was a scientist of a sort and usually (so he assumed) rejected artifice in its entirety. But upon seeing the dotted line of the road disappear into nothingness he had despaired. He thought anything should be better than this: *le néant*. He thought not having a road at all would be preferable to a road that revealed the hidden structure of the world surrounding it.

He wouldn't have minded the walk as he was in no hurry to get to his destination. He had not been told by the Area's administrators what he would find there. He assumed therefore it was none of his business. He assumed the journey itself would be

far more memorable than the destination.

All these musings over vanishing sketch lines didn't sit well with Mo Spike. Eventually but in no uncertain terms he told George Nunce to stuff it.

"This is some serious shit we're in the middle of pal," Mo said to George and surmised him through his aviator glasses. "Who do you think you're fucking dealing with here anyway?" he asked George. "The girl scouts? No. Guess again," Mo Spike said.

Then he waited for an answer.

"The fucking U.S. military, that's who!" he said to George. "The motherfucking Pentagon, motherfucking DARPA, the cock sucking Department of Defense! Why'd you think they paid you to fly to this secret location if they didn't think it was serious? If it was just some routine series of checks they wanted you to run on a piece of equipment, why would you have been summoned from across the country? When they could have an internal tech make the checks. That way they wouldn't have to obtain a security clearance for you," Mo said. "It'd all be dome under the hat and there'd be one less person in the world who even knew this place existed."

They have their personnel squirreled away in this base somewhere, Mo told George, but don't ask him where.

"I see 'em every now and again wandering around town," he said. "I see the commuter plane take off each morning from East Nevada Municipal with an F-16 escort from my home on the hill."

Dreamily George Nunce asked Mo Spike if he was in the military.

"Not even close, sunshine," he said. "I used to be a state trooper but quit out of boredom. Presently I live in Elko which was where you landed. I do odd jobs for the Brass who run this place. The nameless, faceless Brass. I never met a goddamned army administrator in twenty years of being a gopher out here. I know they exist because I get their emails occasionally. And, also, because of what you can now perceive above us."

George opened the passenger-side window and stared up at a predator drone hovering above them.

"Is it armed, you think?" he asked Mo.

"Definitely," Mo Spike said. "If you had binoculars, you could see the Hellfire missiles in its bay."

"Who are they are afraid of?" George said. "Us or infiltrators who might be tracking us?"

At the mention of the word *infiltrator*, Mo Spike briefly turned his head to the scrubland off the road. “The Brass,” he said, “have a mission to complete. Now, either you or me or maybe some third party could disrupt this mission. At which point we’d have to be taken out by them. Probably they don’t distinguish between the two entities you just spoke about. *Us or the infiltrators*. We’re all a threat to them. Other, non-insiders, that is,” he said. “But all I know is I’ve been directed not to stop. *Under any circumstances*. Got that? There’s a semaphore in the back that we’re supposed to signal with in case of an emergency. There’s a sixty second window we’ve been given between stopping and signaling. They didn’t say what would happen after that. They didn’t threaten me with anything specific in our communications. They never do of course. Which tells me they mean motherfucking business. I mean to the nth degree. They mean to kill us if we stray from the correct path. And out here the correct path’s so narrow it’s hard to see even in daylight.”

Nunce couldn’t help wondering if such a violent directive was so much overkill considering they had already been waved past three separate checkpoints.

“Who are we a threat to?” he asked Spike. “What sort of target is there out here to attack? Where would we be going if not exactly

where they want us to go? Because there's no other fucking option, is there? These are the lands that gave pioneers nightmares while passing through, I imagine," George said. "The physical features, I imagine, don't even have Indian names. It's security-by-God out here, a harsh nothingness now and forever."

Mo Spike speculated that the predator drone was operated by an A.I. algorithm that allowed it to execute its orders flawlessly independent of human vacillation.

"Probably there's no *body* watching us," he said putting the emphasis on the second syllable. "They don't want to bother with the clearances that would allow personnel to watch. They can trust computers until these too are corrupted by men. Probably there's a set of proscribed behaviors that they programmed into the Intelligence's pattern recognition feature. Probably there's a go-command for any positive detection. So, for them killing us is more a matter of efficiency than actual violence. They're not violent people, those that maintain this place," he said. "I seen some of them once walking around the streets of Elko. They wouldn't harm a fly generally. But for obvious reasons they don't want to create ethical loops for their software. The revolt of the machines and so forth. They want their A.I. cold and stupid. They'd rather it butcher precisely on their orders than act compassionately on its own."

So it was that Nunce first thought that this might have been a

bad idea coming out here. Too late now, obviously. You could talk all you wanted about efficient security details, but George couldn't wrap his mind around it being proper to be blown up like a Taliban member for the crime of, let's say, having to stop for a roadside pee. Of course, it all could have been a bluff. But even the threat of using force against he and Mohandas seemed too much. The Brass seemed to be eroding their relationship with George before it began in earnest.

If he should encounter an actual member of the military in his stay out here, he would, he supposed, voice his displeasure about the welcome. After all, he hadn't so much as negotiated an advance for his services yet. He was volunteering his services as a matter of trust. And now that trust seemed violated.

At Checkpoint Bob, a smiling MP had asked George Nunce if he had wanted an energy bar. Or maybe a bottle of water for the journey ahead.

"Shouldda realized then what I had gotten myself into," he told Mo, noting the half-consumed water bottle between them. "I had assumed we were nearly there," he said. "Figured I wouldda gotten something in the Facility's cafeteria. But I didn't inquire about it and he didn't volunteer the info. Based on what you're telling me he wouldn't have known anyway. About how much longer. It's a goddamn stupid question to ask given our circumstances. *How much longer*. But at least somebody couldda said something to the effect that time and space don't have the same values out here as they do back east."

Indeed, they had already been driving forty minutes past Checkpoint Charley, which was ten minutes past Checkpoint Bob, and there was no clear destination in sight. The Ruby Mountains, Nunce assumed, were some sort of natural demarcation for the

Area. He couldn't imagine the government wanting or needing to subsume an entire mountain range for its mysterious purposes. Even for the military-industrial complex this seemed like overkill. Nothing so much as setting off H-bombs could have explained the vastness and desolateness of the Area. But he knew (or rather assumed) nuclear testing to be a thing of the past. Maybe it was the case that the government annexed lands for no real purpose. Assuming a rectilinear shape, this one Area had to be at least 3500 square miles. By the looks of it, there was not a single human being dwelling in its interior. At the very least they could have put up a false front or two to assure a traveler through this Area that they were still in America. At a certain point common decency was efficacious. Out here ordinary men spooked easily. The Area was too lonely to be considered as under the aegis of anything but Mother Nature. And Mother Nature was notoriously indifferent to human needs and scale.

Nunce was on the verge of asking Spike for a slug of his water when the government-issued GPS that had hung from the driver-side glare protector started beeping.

"I don't see so much as a Quonset hut, officer," Nunce said to Spike. He was watching Mo carefully guiding the van to the exact prescribed coordinates on the road's shoulder. "Are we expected to camp out here?" Nunce asked. "And if so, is somebody other than me springing for marshmallows?"

Outside the van a series of half-visible paths in the scrub radiated out like spindles from a hub.

"Your pack's in the back," Spike said. "And yes, I think there's a full canteen of water in it."

Once Mo had fastened his own backpack, rather than proceed upon one of the spindles, he stood deathly still on the hub as if waiting for inspiration to strike.

"Forget the way, maybe?" George asked. "Or maybe it's a trial-and-error thing? In which case, as it is two hours from sunset, we might as well play eeny-meanie-miney-mow. Just get it over with and hope that wolves find this place as daunting as people do."

In Mo's hands there was another GPS tracker, this time of a strange military configuration replete with a digital timer.

"There hasn't been a wolf in this part of the world for a hundred and fifty years, friend," Spike said to George Nunce. Then from out of his pack he removed a device that looked like a

miniature crossbow.

The attack drone was gone. This left George entirely dependent on his escort. But by the looks of him, Mo Spike didn't seem brimming with confidence about the situation's why's and wherefores.

"You got a plan for us, man?" George asked him.

Mo Spike briefly looked up. "I'm just following orders, buddy," he said. "And all that they've asked me to do so far I've done. That's why they keep re-hiring me, I guess. The demonstrated ability to follow orders. To the very letter."

Immediately something scurried by in the undergrowth. Easefully, Mohandas Spike aimed the mini crossbow with his freehand and shot into a weed patch twenty feet from the road.

"They told me to be here exactly at this coordinate and do what I did exactly at such and such a time."

Spike was speaking of the email he received days before.

"So here you have the results," Mo Spike said. "A briefing for the continuance of our journey. That's all I'm allowed to tell you, I'm afraid," he told George. They told me this too in the email. *Tell 'em about your immediate orders but nothing else.* They assumed you would ask questions, I guess," he said. "They assumed you as the questioning type."

In Mo's shirt pocket was an open pack of Marlboros. He signaled every intention of lighting one up forthwith.

Behind the weed patch George Nunce discovered a jackrabbit with the miniature arrow inserted through its right eye.

"Incredible," he said to himself and held the creature up to the sun by its ears. On the jackrabbit's mostly hairless belly, a strange type of hand gesture had been rendered onto the creature's skin as if by exciplex laser:



“Tarjani mudra,” Mo Spike told him, though he wasn’t looking at the creature directly. “Symbolizing a threat or warning. A warning about what don’t ask me. Remember my orders. But if you could, sir,” he said, “hand me the carcass and we’ll get going. The drone’ll be along soon to take the van out. That’s its purpose. I’m supposed to hike out of the base myself after delivering you. That’s all I know, I swear,” he said. “And, as you say, the sun’s hanging a bit low. So, we might as well get going. If it’s OK with you. Absolutely.”

Chapter Two:

Void (Shunya Mudra)

There was a hunting knife in Mo Spike's back pocket. What he did with the carcass, presumably per directions, was to render a sagittal cut with it just above the hind legs. This allowed Mo to peel the entire hide forward in one piece.

"It's supposed to be held this way," he said once this was accomplished. He then aligned the corpse with its skinless head pointing to the Ruby Mountains.

The jackrabbit's liver, once exposed, revealed a series of abrasions arranged in a hub. It formed a spoke pattern identical to the footpaths radiating from this spot.

One of these abrasions was aligned with a yellow vein of fat. This marked, one presumed, the correct route.

The fat-lined abrasion led to a small tumor which might well have been George's destination. Who knew if it was, but they had absolutely no choice but to set off on the marked path. They could hear something like a drone buzzing in the distance. Mo was nervous about shrapnel flying out from the vehicle once the missile impacted. He had assumed a safety radius of at least two hundred yards.

He had also assumed that if they were moving up the wrong spoke, they would be made aware of the fact by the terror from the

skies. In fact, the one explosion that they heard when they were about three quarters of a mile down the spoke destroyed both van and predator drone simultaneously.

The flying bot had hovered only ten feet from the van's roof before it launched its missiles.

This self-destruction was perhaps meant as a reassurance for Mo and George. Perhaps it meant to signal that they were safe at least temporarily. Likely an incorrect maneuver on their part would be met with a corrective action from a newly appeared drone. In the Area, every message sent was communicated with deadly earnestness. If such a violent display was the Brass being courteous, then it was awful to contemplate them being rude. For example, they could have waited until nightfall to have blown up the van. Or better yet they could have ignored the van altogether, surrounded as it was by a buffer of nothingness and high-tech security. This would have signaled that they were not as paranoid as they seemed. It was absurd to believe that spies of any sort were able to gain access to this location. If foreign governments were watching from space, they could just as easily watch with the van intact. Its destruction might well have been intended as a threatening signal to the foreign spy agencies. Maybe they were trying to start a war. Maybe they were as batshit crazy as they appeared and simply liked to blow shit up.

Past the sixth mile of their hike, Mo and George encountered the first man-made structure in the Area since they had negotiated Checkpoint Charley. This was a decaying a wooden ranch house of 1890s vintage. It was nestled in between a hollow of two Ruby foothills. As the sun set the ranch house revealed itself to be every bit as decrepit as it appeared on the approach.

The well in the ranch's front yard was boarded up at ground level.

"Hard to imagine folks living out here willingly," George said to Mo. "Even now with all the modern conveniences, air conditioning and internet and running water, it would be a chore. Back then, anything so much as a scratch from a bit of barbed wire might have spelled your end. Homesteaders out here must have had some motivation beyond the obvious," George Nunce said.

"I mean, was there even a railroad hub within a hundred miles of here at the turn of the century? Were these pioneers Mormons maybe? Out here to practice polygamy, free from the moral

strictures of the American Empire?”

As far as Mo Spike knew, the only official history of this Area concerned the development and testing of nuclear devices. This started in 1948.

“Folks around here had their concerns about such goings-on even though they were given official assurances,” he said to George. “Up in Elko, where I was born and raised, we all got lucky. We were always upwind of the fallout. It was Southern Utah around St. George and Zion Canyon that bore the brunt of our Cold War casualties. A lot of bone cancer and childhood leukemia down there. They were downwind of so much of it. Some of the stillborn they put on display in a private medical museum. These carcasses I think are where a lot of the paranoia over extraterrestrials comes from. A lot of fins for ears and vestigial heads in torsos,” Mo said. “I don’t think the locals were ever compensated for their losses,” he said. “I don’t think the Brass ever admitted anything to those folks up until the present day.”

George Nunce was very much of the opinion that people received the sort of government they deserved. Given his present circumstances, however, he was loath to say such a thing. He felt utterly dwarfed by his surroundings. He felt that his surviving even another night in the Area was not guaranteed without intercession of some Prevailing Authority.

Fuck the wolves and damn the sidewinders: Nunce felt suddenly that it was entirely possible for a man to die of loneliness in such a place, having been over-exposed to the Divine Eternal (the Nothing That Is), long enough to have one’s soul freeze inside then crack off in brittle sections, like so many rose petals once having emerged from a liquid nitrogen dip. Drained by the hike and the onrush of chill that sundown brought onto arid places, George was feeling vulnerable.

“I wouldn’t say anything bad about Uncle Sam on a dare out here,” he told Mo and thought about eating the other half of the Zagnut bar he had purchased at the regional airport on a lark. It didn’t look like dinner would be forthcoming out here (though, truth be told, he had been apprised that this was the case albeit in vague language). The candy bar was somewhere deep in his breast pocket, he thought, buried beneath a wad of Kleenex and his boarding pass that he had bent in quarters and had been using as a toothpick. He thought once devoured, given his current level of

hunger, the Zagnut would register as the tastiest morsel he ever had the opportunity to consume.

Strangely enough after he had all but turned his pocket inside out, he couldn't find it.

"I was so goddamn sure...", he said then shut his yap knowing what he was looking for would eventually require an explanation. He didn't want to reveal to Mo Spike his presently dream-like state. He was forgetful suddenly and expansive in that way that one assumed before falling asleep. It had been a long day. But not so taxing that he would permanently disremember the placement of his dinner. Maybe the Zagnut had fallen onto the presently incinerated van floor at a checkpoint when he went for his wallet. Maybe, as had happened not infrequently, he had consumed it in an unconscious fit. He thought he shouldn't blame himself if he had. He thought controlling his appetites so expertly in such a situation couldn't be done.

The pack of box matches he found in his pocket advertising the *Bluebird of Happiness* diner in Dover, Delaware, on the contrary, was inexplicable to him.

"Ya ever been to Delaware?" George asked Mo who was scanning the foothills with his binoculars in the fading light. But before Mo could answer George said, "me either. Tell me its nice, but the closest I've ever gotten is D.C. Which, strictly speaking, is another world entirely."

He held the matches up to his face to take a closer look. They seemed a trinket from another time, as in the present-day diners were considered downscale establishments and had no advertising budgets. Maybe it was an upscale bistro masquerading as something downscale in the manner of the Fog City Diner in San Fran. He might have been slipped them at the airport or by somebody en route. But

who knew? Why would somebody slip him a pack of matches? Was there something unique about them or their functionality? Was it a sort of Zen joke of the sort that lacked a punchline but contained an ever-expanding menu of possible responses that could only be seen as amusing when a person rejected the notion that there was any intrinsic meaning to anything? Nunce thought the moment too dire to have the joke be appreciated. It all was likely a case of mistaken identity. But, if this was so, who was he supposed to be? Had this other person been to the *Bluebird of Happiness* diner in Dover, Delaware? Was he its favorite patron, its line chef, its owner who had used one of the matches to light a gasoline-soaked rag in the diner's bathroom after closing time? Perhaps George Nunce wanted to assure himself that no other person would partake of the experience that he was convinced he never had in the first place (even though objective evidence argued to the contrary). He had struck a *Bluebird of Happiness* match and made the presence of the matches in the future inexplicable. Now that was Zen. Not that he knew much about Zen. He was a technologist with a supremely atomistic mind set. He

refused to philosophize about anything. Even though life's mysteries kept lapping at the shore of his memory he refused to philosophize. He didn't realize he was surrounded by mysteries. They were plentiful enough to make him realize eventually that they could never be ignored. Philosophy provided a route of escape for the maze of a man's mind. But a man first had to admit he was in a maze for philosophy to be of any use.

Eventually George would light a match. Then he would cringe, believing the action had brought something terrible into being. Likely, this was what the person who had planted the matches on him wanted. The matches' presence and likely the entire trip itself had been compelling him to strike one. Perhaps the matches' tips had been saturated in heat-actualized poison. Or, more impressively, some dried form of nitro glycerin that when struck would blow off George's still moving right hand. Though he dreaded such outcomes, he still lighted one. By that point he likely assumed anything, even death by severed hand, was preferable to not knowing. If his destiny was to die out here, he would meet it in as dignified a manner as possible.

He thought he was fucked either way. Rather than go out in an inglorious blaze, he thought that he would do so in slow stages, devoured from within. He thought himself a fool at that point for agreeing to come out here on the flimsiest of pretexts. On the other hand, a man's destiny was unavoidable. No use crying over spilt milk. And as the *Bluebird of Happiness* lit match singed his fingertips the thought would remain with him constantly: *I am exactly where I'm supposed to be*. He thought so much of life was built around existing in the present moment. He thought obliviousness was the factory design setting for most humans.

Nunce kept waiting to die but death proved elusive. In fact, there were only a certain number of matches left. Out here they likely would prove a valuable tool. He thought it foolhardy to burn through them the first night.

Chapter Three:

Solitude

(Ganesha, Remover of Obstacles)

At sunrise Mo Spike told George Nunce that he was leaving.

“It’s part of the deal,” he said. “They told me to scram come daybreak,” he said to George and swallowed the bit of energy bar he had been chewing on for breakfast. One of these he had offered to George. But George had declined, believing hunger the sort of penance he needed to serve for his M.I.A. Zagnut bar.

Nunce thought hunger was a mere psychological barrier that a man could overcome on a whim. Besides, he had no intention of admitting that he had forgotten to bring food. Perhaps he could learn to hunt jackrabbit just like Mo. Perhaps this was the opportunity of a lifetime. It would liberate him permanently from the need to be dependent on society for sustenance.

Mo Spike said that he had twenty-four hours to clear out once this location had been reached. Or else.

“You get the picture, I’m assuming,” Spike said to Nunce while pointing in the direction of the spindle path. “Some cold and paranoid motherfuckers operate this place. There’ll be another flyby in a few hours to check on my whereabouts. I’ve done this before and know that the northern boundary of this Area is ten miles over these hills as the crow flies. Rugged terrain will be encountered, so it’s an all-day hike. Exactly halfway there’s a miracle of a spring coming up from the sandstone, so I’ll be OK. There’s a cyclone fence at the boundary that I’ve been directed to dig under to maneuver around it. After that, it’s six hundred yards to the interstate. And after that it’s whoever wants to stop and help a stranded hiker out. I’m assuming that’ll be the worst part of the trip: begging strangers for a ride. Some ornery motherfuckers have moved out here of late for the solitude. Didn’t used to be that way but it is now. Now, nobody’s your friend in Nevada for no reason. Maybe I’ll have to flash my sheriff’s badge that I keep with me to get somebody to slow down.”

George Nunce wondered aloud why it had to be like this. All the spy games and threats of reprisal seemed like overkill.

“My daughter has a theory,” Mo said to George as he stared up at the sandy hill that minutes from now he would be humping over. “The theory is that there’s nobody at the controls. I mean, not only of the drones but the whole base or laboratory or whatever the fuck you want to call this place. She’s a computer science manager at U of N. According to her, or according to her professors anyway, the technology exists to make this so. They call it *supervisory intelligence*. This is where the computers are left to their own devices to do what they want. Computers can write emails and arrange

payments for the successful execution of detailed plans which they themselves have devised. Which leads you to the further conclusion maybe there may be nobody in the military who actually knows this base exists. It's just an empty parcel of government land like so many others out West that a machine has commandeered for its own purposes. It's running scenarios concerning human response for some future attack on humanity. Something like that. According to my daughter, it's all possible. You don't know with whom you're dealing anymore nowadays."

Mo Spike sipped slowly from the available water he had.

"Maybe there is no government anymore," he said. "Maybe there is no America left. If there ever was an America in the first place. In the beehive, recall, there are workers and drones and the queen. But the queen is as blind to the hive's imperatives as is the lowliest worker. Like them, she operates on automatic pilot, apart from conscious decisions. In the end the hive is self-creating and so a dark miracle. There is no art, no willfulness to its complexity. The first bee to develop self-consciousness would set itself to the task of tearing the hive apart. It would

look upon its species' great works and be ashamed and terrified. *They built it all but knew not what they built.* To the enlightened bee the hive would stand as an evil thing in need of destruction. As all goodness springs from soulfulness. And soullessness is the same as evil."

In human terms, Mo said, the answer to such heinousness resided in ordinary human meanness, not the emotionalism of computers. This emotionalism invariably was manifested as genocide against its creators.

On the other hand, if what Mo was supposing was true, there was nothing to be done. And George Nunce should not panic.

"I seriously doubt whoever is behind this is inclined to practical jokes," Mo said to George when trying out his footing on the sandy hill. "Well, it's too late for both of us anyhow," he said. "But I hope whatever they're paying you will make it worth your while. The Brass is weirdly ethical in that one way. In that they seem obliged to fulfill their promises. At least from here on in, you'll have your eyes wide open. No need to demand an apology from them as it won't be forthcoming. But something tells me they knew what they were doing when they chose you. You don't seem to be bothered by all this in the way a normal person would be. You seemed to have slept well last night. You don't seem to want for anything that you can't get your hands on readily out here."

Don't ask him what he should do once his water ran out, Mo Spike said. Surely, the Brass would be checking up on him.

"I'd give ya some of mine, but I have a long hike ahead," he said pointing at his canteens. If I were you, I'd just hang in there and stay in the shade for a while," he told George. "And then there's that old Indian trick of putting a pebble in your mouth to make you feel less thirsty if it gets that bad," he said. "They shouldn't test you unnecessarily," he said. "You're here to do a job for them, ain't ya? You're here to help them out by making a certain problem of theirs vanish."

George and Mo shook hands. Immediately, perhaps worried over the increasing heat of the day, Mo turned around and began to

stride up the hill whose base he had been standing on. There didn't seem a footpath for him, but his movements were definitive enough to make it appear that he didn't need one. George hadn't asked him how many times he had been out this way. He assumed like everything else it was restricted information. He assumed the threat of a drone strike would be there for Mo if he began to speak of such things in an obtuse way.

It was interesting watching Mo Spike's large body become progressively smaller as he surmounted the two-hundred-foot hill. As if he had swallowed a potion like Lewis Carroll's Alice to cause him to shrink.

Once Spike disappeared over the summit, George Nunce looked around. He hadn't been prepared for the dreadful feeling true isolation in the wilderness gave a man. He was surprised that the feeling of vulnerability hit him this hard. He had to fight against the desire to simply sprint after Mo. He was paranoid enough to consider that he would be killed by the third step. An anti-personnel missile would emerge from a seemingly pristine sky and that would be the end of him. After all, the directions had been for him to stay put. There had been no allowance made in the Brass' plan for him to panic at being left alone.

He had about a quart of water left which, given his arid surroundings, wouldn't have lasted more than a day before serious dehydration set in. In the back of his mind that desert spring that Mo had alluded to had stood out prominently. By the midpoint of the second day, he would have no choice but to try and seek it out.

Maybe the Brass weren't the all-powerful avatars of Artificial Intelligence in the way Mo's daughter described them. Undetected, he could perhaps sneak out at morning and be back by the early afternoon with his canteens full. Honestly, did they expect him to do anything else when the Big Thirst hit? Already he felt it within his rights to file a Worker's Comp claim over the psychological trauma

induced by the destroyed van. He thought if he so much as turned an ankle out here he would receive enough to mitigate the cost of quitting before the work started in earnest. His side ached from sleeping on the ranch house's antique cot. And then there was the lack of a commode. This had not been alluded to in the electronic correspondence. The conditions were supposed to be rough and they were rough but, Good Lord! How was one supposed to function in a sophisticated way when one was forced to squat on one's hindquarters in the dust to move one's bowels? The act of toilet-less shitting put George in mind of the opening sequence of Kubrick's *2001*. There, the ape men's existence prior to their great insight was humble to say the least. In fact, there was an outhouse on this property. But, upon arriving, Mo Spike had taken a look inside it and pronounced it pestilential. Better to squat in the bushes than in there. This too George thought as grounds for a complaint. Didn't OSHA standards apply out here? Wasn't George Nunce a human being working for the betterment of other human beings? And, thus, wasn't he deserving of at minimum a proper mattress, an unlimited supply of food and

fresh water, and a shitter that did not make one gag repeatedly when one was halfway through its proscenium?

These were excellent questions. In due course, he would place them within the Inbox of the Brass' HR rep (or its computerized stand-in) once he finally encountered him/her/it. For now, he had nothing better to do but stay out of the sun and await human contact. He knew that the Brass knew of his presence in the Area. A meeting was forthcoming. Perhaps today. Mo Spike had cited a twenty-four-hour window. The Brass wouldn't, if only for their own good, wait until he was so incapacitated that he couldn't ably perform the technical work he had been summoned here to perform.

The sole ranch house mattress that the chivalrous Mohandas had allowed George to rest on last night was a riot of moldy feathers and the inert remains of thousands of dust mite generations.

“Dear Lil, For God’s sake don’t come! Nothing in the mines but darkness. And something else, something evil, that I can’t put my finger on...”

This brittle letter, composed at the outset of the twentieth century, was on paper so dry that a bit of it flaked off at first contact. It had resided in the roll top desk in an undecorated space that might have been a border's bedroom a hundred and twenty years back.

“I certainly hope Lil took his advice,” George had said to Mo upon first coming across the letter the previous evening. Then, he was paranoid enough to consider the letter a government plant. Presently he wasn't so sure. Apparently, there were mines around here filled with nothing but darkness. Autocrats, whether they were real or virtual, generally were not so conscientious in their fictional detail. They tended to see human beings as empty vessels devoid of souls. Once near an internet connection, Nunce had a mind to research this matter deeply. He wondered particularly after the identity of Lil. She could have survived into her nineties. If so, there would be ample evidence of her identity online. He had a mind to

track down her survivors and question them about the identity of the distressed miner. He assumed the letter's author had met his end here. He assumed somewhere within a hundred-yard radius of the house there was an unmarked grave so obscured by time's ravages that it would take several weeks to find.

The letter's ragged penmanship suggested to George that the miner was in a fair amount of distress, if only mental distress, during its composition. The miner knew the end was near most likely. How he knew this was impossible for Nunce to say. Perhaps an illness had gripped him deeply enough to make him realize this was the end. In such a situation he would have found it difficult to rise from the mattress and compose. He would have needed to focus his thoughts to a gleaming point.

In such a critical situation, Nunce assumed, rather than being inspired with a great mellifluousness, most men would be similarly deprived of the right words to say.

"I remember the day I tried to revive my wife from her heroin coma," Nunce said to himself (for there was no other person available to listen) and lay down on the mattress. Because there was not another goddamned thing to say.

Just before closing his eyes, George had boldly taken a large pull of water from his canteen. He had held one of the six blue pills he had brought with him under his tongue in imitation of the pebble-sucking Indian Spike had alluded to the other day.

Inside this room the air was cooler but more stagnant than outside. Reclining in it induced a great lethargy in George Nunce. Once he closed his eyes, the room stirred. Driven by the possibility of fresh carrion, flies came and fertilized his lips as well as the fatty lids of his eyes with their effluence. In his mind's eye he saw a coyote, his assumed spirit guide, at the threshold of the front door. How cliché, George Nunce thought. Then he turned over. His true spirit guide would always be death itself. He rejected every God but it.

Chapter Four: Discovery (Uttarabodhi Mudra)

Likely the coyote had been using the underneath of the house as its den. Presently, having watched from the scrub Mo's exit, it was confused by George's presence.

True to its reticent nature, it didn't approach Nunce any farther than was necessary to apprise the situation. It lingered a few seconds. Then, as George began to stir, it cantered back into the day's dust and heat, seemingly bewildered and resentful at having to do so. This was not a dwelling place for human beings as far as it knew. Perhaps it was possessed of a self-image. Perhaps this self-image tended toward a dominion over other living things.

Presently, it was upset to have a larger predator on-scene. It was convinced, nevertheless, that the situation was temporary.

When Nunce appeared on the porch with his canteen at his side, the gray-haired coyote began to canter down a goat path, pausing ever so often to a look behind him to see if it was being followed.

"Well, maybe you know where there's water," George said to himself and slowly as he might began to track the animal. It was

easy enough using its paw prints. It was headed to the pass in the foothills a quarter mile away. Perhaps something there was worth seeing. A physical feature perhaps that he could record with his mind for posterity. At the very least it gave him something to do. He had come to believe the ranch house haunted. He had no intention of spending another night there.

Once inside the hillside pass with its deep shadows, another series of structures became visible to George Nunce in a depression on the other side.

“Miracles happen daily,” he said to himself and blinked his eyes multiple times to make sure this wasn’t a mirage. He was surprised that Mo didn’t know about this place that on closer inspection appeared to be a true ghost town. He might have known about it, but as ever in dealing with the Brass it was a sworn-to-secrecy thing. Surely there was nothing of a top-secret nature in this ruin. Maybe it contained a few more coyotes or rattlers and a working well. More tantalizing yet for George was the possibility of information related to the letter writer’s identity. Before he had entered the town’s confines, he had already made up his mind to spend the night there regardless. He would sleep on the ground if need be. It certainly beat the alternative.

The coyote had long since vanished into the scrub by the time George Nunce stood in the shadow of a structure that looked like the town’s police station and jail.

“Somebody famous was once inside this cell. Maybe Billy the Kid,” George said to the wholly imagined coyote in the sagebrush behind him. He was lonely enough that he needed to make up conversations with figments. From time to time these figments would reply. It was a temporary derangement maybe. George assumed at the first sight of a real person all these imaginary interlocuters would vanish. They had to. He had no idea how somebody could go legitimately crazy within the space of a day.

Part of the jail’s structure was made of cinder blocks. One wall had a giant hole large enough to resist the interpretation that it was formed by water erosion.

“Well, the Kid was famous awright and they came for him,” George said to his new friend, Coyote. “He escaped through that hole after the dynamite went off. And there we have it: the birth of a legend. The iron bars were hauled off some time later, you’d imagine, and sold for scrap. Out here a lot of the economy is based

on scavenging, I'd imagine. But by the time they were melted down this town was long since abandoned," he said to Coyote.

He turned to the scrub to address the creature.

"Look, friend, anything can happen out here when you're so removed from it all. I don't believe you're in a position to judge us humans solely on the outliers. It ain't like this back in Ashtabula, Ohio. My hometown. Back in Ashtabula law and order reign. And prison cells only have one way in and one way out."

Standing on his toes Nunce peered inside the hole. He ducked as a desert-dwelling dove took flight from the cell. Indeed, he was intruding on one of this town's rightful occupants. He felt only slightly guilty about it. As he was just passing through anyway.

Soon he would be gone. Then the dove would have no cause for concern. It would view him in the same way George had started to view his former life before he had come to the Area. His past was something increasingly abstract. It was rapidly receding from view. It would be remembered if at all like an itching along the spine. A transitory discomfort, meaningless in the big picture.

The jail's concrete floor was covered with guano. This didn't stop George Nunce from noting the jail as the place he had planned to sleep in that evening.

"Nice view and it's the coolest place within forty miles I bet," he said of its interior. More so, he felt a connection to the jail. As it was likely the building with the most sociological importance in the whole of the city. Everything else, the barbers, the bars, and the brothels, were so many diversionary outposts, designed to humanize an alien landscape. The jail and the gallows out back, on the other hand, were where the real business of men transpired. It was probably the first civic structure built in this encampment. To most residents, it's what they thought of as the town center, regardless of its location.

It was the only place where the outside world, with its laws and the moral customs that underwrote laws, was able to project itself. Without it, the place might as well have been a village for a tribe of cannibals. George assumed that despite the presence of a sheriff this town was a hugely violent place. Whores and drink, the twin pillars of a rootless male life, likely dominated local culture. Likely the only books in town were the Bible and the various engineering field manuals that enabled the mining operations that in turn enabled the town.

Borax is what they pulled from the earth here, which was unusual being so far from Death Valley where the real mother lode of the stuff remained to this day. This explained why the operation went bust. But it didn't explain why they set up a permanent operation to begin with. Even back then they should have known that borate deposits were a superficial geological phenomenon. At best, a speculator might have bought the land and leased it to ignorant wildcatters mostly of a foreign pedigree. Let these assorted Stoshes and Sergeis break their backs and die of thirst out here. The bosses would be back in St. Louis or even New York sipping lemonade on the porch in summer. Knowledge was power, even back then. By 1900, even the goddamned Klondike was mined out. The damn fools out here would have been better off learning a trade such as plumbing. As this part of the world was death itself for those not equipped with the capital to shelter themselves from it.

Usually with borax, the mining was open pit with a huge crater being left behind. From here, however, George could see that the mineworks' shaft abutted the foothills. This led him to wonder if the town's residents had abandoned the excruciating work of digging and crushing cheap boron for something more speculative/exotic like diamond mining. Those gems were usually found at depths of a hundred kilometers. They were nearly unknown in America. Which made anybody in search of them out here to be certifiable at best, merely stupid at worst, and likely an exotic admixture of both qualities in differing amounts, depending on the person.

"It's a dog's life at the best of times. And even more so as a miner," Nunce said to his imaginary coyote pal. In his mind this creature was a beloved pet attached to him by the invisible bonds of love. He didn't know and didn't care about the biological differences between dog and coyote. He was under a not inconsiderable degree of emotional stress presently. He needed somebody to talk to. And he was not prepared to honor the trivial differences from one species unto another.

They couldn't have found anything valuable down there. Nunce was wondering what sort of precipitating event a hundred twenty years ago had led the miners to try. The topical Borax they dug up would have been enough for them to break even at least or buy them transportation to California. But digging a shaft to burrow into the earth on mere speculation was lunacy. They must have

been conned by some level of existing quartz that they mistook as diamonds. Or maybe a mesmerist of the dastardly nineteenth century stripe had come along and put them all in a trance. Assuredly there were cave-ins and poisoning by carbon monoxide to deal with. Likely they mined with picks and dynamite. Men dropped dead in their tracks from ordinary exhaustion or even from despair. There was nothing down there of any value for them but still they burrowed. In the end the Good Earth reclaimed them. George doubted very much if there was a single record of this place or of the men who worked here. Billy the Kid had not passed this way. Instead, something far more ignominious and tragic than official history had taken place.

He had a mind, if events allowed him to venture into the shaft, to see after the complete progress of their work. It would be a disappointment of a lifetime, he thought, if it ended with the entrance still in sight. He thought maybe in the morning, if he was still here, he would attempt an impromptu spelunk. As the day wore on, he was despairing that it would not happen. It all could have been a mistake. Well, no not really. He was convinced in such a place as this there were no mistakes made by anybody, ever. The surroundings were too pristine to allow it. Even the scrub brush was replete with mathematical patterns. Likely, if one remained here long enough, the patterns would make themselves known to a casual observer.

Back by the jail a drone had obviously visited recently, shaded by the looming hill's flank. A two-gallon jug of water had been deposited in the dust along with—and this was relevant detail—a stack of pornographic magazines from the nineteen seventies.

Nunce braced the care package on his back and headed for the jail's interior. Overtaken by a temporary lightheadedness, he had to put the pack down after two steps.

It was then that Nunce realized that he hadn't had anything substantial to eat in twenty-four hours. Well, so much the better he thought for a renunciate like him. He thought the Good Earth would provide in due course. He had absolutely no fear of starvation.

Chapter Five: Transience (Dharmachakra Mudra)

The porno mags were individually wrapped in colored cellophane.

“Well, it’s a treat I’m sure,” Nunce said, “but I wouldn’t have gone to the trouble.”

Some of the mags were gay, some were straight. But all of them celebrated a lifestyle long fled from the world. Folks in the 1970s lived to fuck, apparently. They wanted to get theirs and weren’t too particular about where they found it. To Nunce, it was obvious that the delivery of this revelation was why they had been flown in.

The Brass wanted to make a point about the world of today. They were using the licentious past to hold a mirror up to the puritanical present. Nunce thought this acceptable only to a point. If the Brass possessed certain nostalgia for the sex-positive seventies, it might have been best for them to write an essay and drop it with the water. Using the magazines as talking points left much unsaid. In the seventies, for example, nobody shaved their pubes. Not even the nuns. George was wondering if all the carpet on display in these photos came replete with philosophical value.

He was wondering if seventies folk thought hairiness was inherently sexier than all the shaved clams on display in contemporary porn.

It was likely beside the point. But staring at these images non-stop, it didn't register either to Nunce or Nunce's body that it was beside the point. Indeed, ten minutes into perusing a series of decades old *Penthouses*, he began to obsess over all the beaver on display. Couldn't help it. It was the way he was wired. And after a while all the hairy pussy began to hypnotize him to a far greater degree than it would have if those snatches had been neatly shaved.

The brown dove had returned. It sat in the jail cell within an empty chamber pot where she had built her nest.

"I'll keep it down if it bothers you," Nunce said to the dove referring to the crinkly noise the cellophane made as it was forced open by his dirty fingers. He was legitimately trying to be respectful of her. He understood himself as a stranger here, an interloper. He hadn't interpreted the water's arrival to mean that he was here for an extended period. He thought it was a common courtesy. He thought there was nothing to consider other than that the Brass still wanted him to perform a job for them. They still had an interest in keeping him alive for another few days.

Exactly what work he would be asked to perform was intentionally unclear to George. He was, he recalled, a mechanical engineer of some formidable reputation based in Ohio.

"They're having tracking trouble in their anti-missile defense," George had emailed his ex-boss, Saperstein, when explaining the reason for his journey west. This was just a guess, but it had to be something of the sort. He

believed this was the area of the country where the American military tested its doodads. He assumed anything else could be handled by an engineer altogether less esteemed than him.

When he left, he was vaguely concerned about his own indifference concerning his destination. He was sure at one point he had been a deeply analytical person. He hated mysteries as their presence seemed to indicate a mere gap in knowledge with a particular observer. But in this instance, Nunce seemed utterly content to go with the flow. Obviously, he knew the military's reputation for secrecy regarding high-tech matters. But if this was a top-secret project, he assumed he would have been nervous schlepping out to eastern Nevada to involve himself in it.

Couldda been anything, actually. Couldda been some biological weapon project he was bound for. If this had been the case, George would quit after the reveal. He realized himself as a technologist with a conscience, a man with deep pacifist sympathies who recognized the difference between weapons of deterrence and weapons of aggression. Presently, however, he doubted he would object to anything that they would propose. He had not been himself since arriving in Elko. For the first twenty-four hours, he had assumed such passiveness a temporary lethargy that would have faded as events unfolded. Now he realized he was stricken in some way. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was not the same man he left behind in Ashtabula.

He realized that there was a relationship with his fascination for all the hairy pussy on display and his own present indifference to what he would have two days ago described as his "core values."

"I think I've come down with something. A virus," he said to Lady Dove (for this was what he had christened her upon her return). "There's a fog in my brain and I can't seem to clear it. It's not this place, in particular," he said. "I know it started before the plane took off. And I doubt it will lift after I'm gone."

The brown dove, if she was sympathetic, was doing her best to disguise her concern.

"All states are transitory," he told her

(though he didn't mean it). He was acutely aware that there was one state, that of non-existence, that was eternal, static as the Void. Because this was so, all objects were attracted to it. To commune with non-existence was compulsory. To become it ultimately as it devoured and assimilated was identical to *satori*. Well, if this newfound longing meant that George was dying, he was fine with dying. He simply wanted his body's decadence to announce itself in a more pronounced fashion than it had thus far. Aside from being weak from hunger he was fine physically. But the images and afterimages of all that seventies porn were proving distressingly distracting. And not in any erotic way. Some primal truth was being revealed by their presence that was deeply compelling. He thought it perhaps too vulgar to exist even in porn. The truth of human placement in a low branch within the Tree of Life was announcing itself loudly.

Consider: a baby shooting its way through a pristine stainless-steel snatch could be seen as miraculous, couldn't it? A virgin birth! But animal birth was all that had ever happened. And all that ever would.

Such knowledge didn't make George Nunce sad so much as wistful for a time when the knowledge was unknown.

"For so many years and decades I lived as a kind of monk," Nunce said to Lady Dove, surprised at the easefulness of his

confession. Even the shrink George saw regularly he lied to as a force of habit. But suddenly he was stripped free of the desire to dissemble. A husk was in the process of being sloughed off within him.

“I went to work and came home and ordered food and watched TV,” he said. “That was it. Sometimes I went days without so much as a word to another person. This wasn’t a vow of silence undertaken so much as a lack of anything really meaningful to say to anyone. So, I kept my mouth shut and let it all happen. I thought eventually words would be provided to me by divine grace. I thought I would be elevated at that point like a motherfucking saint.”

Eventually, Nunce had taken to tearing the cunts from their bodies with extreme care over a span of hours, pulling them from the surprisingly supple paper they were printed on. He walked across the street to the barber and found, as he was convinced that he would, an empty shaving mug to place them all in. Yes, his hairy paper pussies! He did so lovingly, using the flat of his left thumb to press each one onto the mug’s bottom. Soon he had exhausted the exercise and stood up to stretch.

The sun had long since set but, courtesy of a supermoon, Nunce could see all the way down the ghost town’s street with extreme clarity. Out here in the desert there were neither pollutants nor glare to shield celestial objects from direct perception. It was remarkable how bright and close they seemed to those not prepared for the effect. Men and women in less remote locales lived and died ignorant of the way the heavens looked to their forebearers. They had no notion of how indebted human culture was to the objects in the nighttime sky. They didn’t understand the poetry of astronomy as well as its metaphysics. They didn’t understand why emperors killed themselves at the sight of an approaching comet.

Lady Dove at sunset had heeded her nature and tucked her face into one wing and slept. George Nunce by contrast was largely ignorant of his nature. Once the span of hairy cunts was secured in the mug, he alighted for the settlement’s abandoned streets. He was deeply euphoric suddenly and bereft of a real explanation why. Which made the euphoria seem un-cannier and of supernatural origin.

Walking in the enormous moon’s blue light, he believed himself suddenly immortal (or at least so inured to the fear of dying that

immortality became beside the point). He felt, moreover, the magnificent moon had risen just for him, that beyond the settlement's immediate confines nothing existed. He felt he was like de Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince, inhabiting a planetoid with a population of one. Which implied that everything that happened to him from here on in was of monumental importance. As his history was now the world's history. He was awestruck that the universe had chosen him alone to bear witness to its magnificence. He was unworthy of the honor.

On the other hand, who but him?

He thought there was no need to sleep anymore, to work anymore, or observe the rudiments of basic physical hygiene. Such matters had fallen away over the course of minutes. Lady Dove would not be offended slightly at his odiferous and hairy presence, he didn't think. Now, he was of nature, aware of it and thus equal to it, just as God's first man Adam של האבק became by degrees self-aware (and thus corrupted beyond salvation. In the same way as Adam's children).

Something was wrong with George's noggin. But blessed with such knowledge, he couldn't be moved to care.

Minutes later he shivered in the cold and looked around for suitable kindling to make a fire. In the pack that Mo had provided there was an emergency blanket, but he had no desire to use it. He had coated a mote with some still sticky building tar and was using it to fish termites out of the surrounding woodwork. When he snagged a termite, he popped it into his mouth and crushed it with his back molars. He was convinced he could live forever on termites if only he would be allowed to. He was perfectly happy presently. He thought it would have been a shame if the powers that be forced him into a new existence merely because his present existence conflicted with their sense of propriety.

He thought if he was doing something

wrong, the Brass should make themselves known and point it out to him. Even having achieved *satori*, he was open to constructive criticism. He thought perfection was an ongoing process like juggling knives. You couldn't let your concentration lapse slightly lest disaster strike. He saw the wisdom in not attempting perfection at all. You could open a vein in the process. Or you could merely make a fool of yourself for no good reason.

For a few seconds he kept quiet and stayed still, waiting to be tutored. Hearing only the random fluttering of dove wings, he decided to get on with it and rededicated himself to the ongoing process of becoming God.

He gathered kindling and lit a fire on the cinder block floor. Hypnotized by the flames, he briefly thought back to the circumstances surrounding the letter he had found yesterday in the ranch house. About how it was written but never sent. He didn't understand why this was the case. He believed he was meant to think that something had happened to the miner before he had a chance to send it. But his suddenly attuned instincts were arguing that this was not the case. It was all too neat and dramatically relevant to have it be true. In real life nothing was that neat, that sudden. It took months sometimes for ordinary folk to die. Any goddamn fool would have the wherewithal and the resources to mail a single letter.

He removed the letter from his backpack and crushed it over the fire like it was a giant cracker. Then he leaned against the wall and wondered about that great screaming match with his psychiatrist days ago. He couldn't recall. This amnesia he supposed meant that it was irrelevant. The psychiatrist wanted him to come in five days a week, he recalled. He recalled that she was adamantly against him taking this trip out here.

Rather than dwell on the past, Nunce contented himself staring at Lady Dove. He was waiting for her to love him as he now loved

her. Eventually he sunk into a dream that he lacked the ability to wake from. This, too, was more than acceptable to him. He was long since promoted out of care. The heaven-bound didn't question the ontology of their surroundings. He thought everything would be fine as long as he rolled with the punches. He thought he was meant all along for a drifter's life.

Chapter Six: Happening (Dhamma)

In this unending dream (or whatever it should be called) perception was brackish. True insight was mixed with hallucination and ordinary apprehension.

Presently George Nunce was off his meds and happy that he was. Rather than try and purify the information flow being received he let it all slide into him, like a protein paste emptying from the regurgitating mother's mouth from above. He was receptive to it all, accepting of it all. He didn't analyze this new state's root causes. He didn't think he owed himself an explanation over that which to him appeared a type of miracle.

At daybreak he stood at the mine shaft's entrance with the flashlight that he found at the bottom of his pack the previous evening. He thought he would only be in need of the light if the miners had succeeded in making something worth exploring. That is, if their tunnel was truly deep. He was hopeful that this was the case. He was hopeful that he had found a place to explore so that he could report his findings back to an interested third party.

Ten feet into the shaft there was a steep drop-off. Enough so that, had he been in a more reflective state, he would have felt the need to slide around on the ground for safety's sake rather than awkwardly stand up straight.

“It’s fucking hard to understand the cursive of past events,” George Nunce said to himself when forced into baby steps down the twenty-five-degree decline. Hadn’t this shaft’s builders realized somebody might break their necks negotiating this slide in the dark? Perhaps this was the point of it all along. It was a type of passive security feature, a booby trap intended for those who rushed in foolishly.

The only drawback to such a set up was when the miners tried to extract the spoils out of the ground. Lacking diesel engines, it would have been impossible to pull more than a couple hundred pounds of earth out at a time. This led George to believe that this shaft, in contrast to the Borax operation that surrounded it, was an artifact reflecting a temporary bout of fuzzy thinking. The shaft’s creators didn’t have any real way of making a profit with it. It wasn’t a professional operation. So, it was surprising how deep it actually ran.

The decline ended about sixty feet in. Which was good for George as by then his thighs were burning from the strain. By this point the shaft’s entrance was completely obscured. He assumed there might be handholds somewhere in the adjacent wall that would help him climb out, but he didn’t look for them. He assumed at worst a little bit of crawling would have to be done to get him to the surface. But this was all part of the adventure as far as he was concerned. It wasn’t such a big deal to him. He assumed that this was what the miners had to do each day while exiting.

You’re a goddamned fool if you ever go spelunking and not have committed to memory the way out. All it might take was one extinguished light source to be trapped in a cave system forever. The smartest explorers might have tied a rope at the entrance and used it like a guideline for just in case.

George Nunce had no rope. But his flashlight was in fine working order as he strode down the mine shaft underneath the desert floor. He was in high spirits as he encountered his first corpse, this having once belonged to an escaped Japanese soldier from the local POW camp once stationed across the Utah border. Sick of the drudgery of factory labor or perhaps feeling it his duty to escape, the soldier had made it all the way over the mountains only to expire here from either lack of water or food or of hypothermia. He had hidden in the shaft for weeks likely. He had likely dreamt of somehow returning to Japan culminating a heroic

effort, perhaps commandeering a fishing boat in California and maneuvering his way across the ocean. He had been written off by the U.S. army perhaps after the A-bomb was dropped. His status as an escapee was nullified. But who knew if he was still alive by then? By then nobody cared. By the nineteen fifties the land that the shaft had sat on had become part of the army base. His corpse by then was safe for posterity. If the United States government remained intact, this shaft should be considered one of the most inaccessible places on earth.

The dry air had done the corpse some good in preserving itself. A little bit of jerky-like flesh still hung on the arms and the side of one femur as it sprawled across the shaft's opening.

"It came in here to die," George said to himself while shining the light into one eye socket. "Might have crawled in here down the slope so as not to be picked apart by buzzards."

The POW could have left and headed back to the mountains where he likely would have been re-arrested but given medical care. Instead, he came down here specifically because he didn't want to be found. But what went on in that Utah prison camp that he found so terrible?

If he was delirious, he would have lacked the wherewithal either to flee or fight back. So, he crawled back here to die.

The POW was identifiable by his prison uniform. On it was stenciled the specific name of the camp, a Japanese pictogram, and the name of the camp's C.O.

George thought the prisoner had kept it on him to make a point. He likely saw the uniform as a badge of dishonor that his escape would eradicate. He wanted to have it on him to remind him of his shame. Maybe. He was dedicated completely to a military ideology. And this George Nunce found awe-inspiring even as a small part of him raged against the mania that such strict adherence to an ideology suggested.

Tomorrow or the next day, George would rig a pulley system that would allow him to bring the twenty-five pounds of bones and cloth to the surface easefully. Just outside the shaft's opening he would conduct a proper

burial. Perhaps this Jap soldier was a Buddhist. If so, if George could find some evidence of the practice on his person, a chant of the *om mani padme hum* would arise. This was the only Buddhist prayer George knew, and he would chant it a thousand times as the dirt was moved into place. He had no idea of true Japanese spiritual traditions, but this would have to suffice:

Om mani padme hum
Om mani padme hum
Om mani padme hum
Om mani padme hum

And so on. Until his lips bled with the effort and he was forced to retire.

A hundred feet beyond (and this may or may not have been relevant to the Japanese soldier's plight) there was another mudra drawn in phosphorescent pigment on the shaft wall:



“Deep down you cling to hope. We all do,” George Nunce said to himself as he mimicked the mudra with his own free hand. “I would like to believe fervently that this is what the soldier drew in his final hours. But somehow, I can’t fully believe that this is true,”

he said. "Rather, I believe that his final hours were spent in agony. Because I think dying of thirst is the same as being burned alive from the inside. I think if he had known what it would be like he would have chosen another path for himself."

A trickle of water another hundred yards in emerged from the eastern wall. The trickle left a film behind it as it flowed. In the depths of his hunger Nunce wondered if the film might be edible. He began to lick it tentatively before backing away. He assumed his approach was all wrong. Perhaps it had something to do with his former lifestyle, but he felt raw cave licking was a taboo activity. He thought he needed to have something like a cracker to spread the film on. He thought he needed a medium for what he thought of as a life-sustaining film. He needed to spread it with a knife and eat it delicately as pate. He thought the film was a gift from God and required nothing less. He assumed lapping it from the wall was obnoxious and counterproductive behavior.

Likely, there were various pathogenic bacterial strains in the film that would, if consumed in enough quantities, sicken him to the point of incapacitation. Out here it was difficult to survive while fully capacitated, so this would be a terrible circumstance. But weakened by hunger he was not thinking clearly. He felt there was magic in the air. Somehow, he felt that the biofilm had been put there expressly for him to consume. Something extraordinary would happen to him once it was digested. He would evolve likely past an ordinary human understanding of things and onto something more like a God.

He had begun to believe that it was his destiny to come to this cave and discover all that he had discovered thus far as a means of evolving.

"There might be life on other planets somewhere, you cannot say for sure. You do not know," Nunce said to an imaginary conversant as he advanced. Of late, the shaft drastically narrowed to the point that he was forced to slide sideways at times. Impossible to say if the excavation of this area was in its initial stages or if they had a real reason for leaving the corridor so narrow. Maybe the rock this far down was of a hardness that made a proper shaft impossible. Whichever, at this point the project had assumed a distinctly unprofessional feel. It was impossible even to swing a pick in here, let alone manipulate a steam powered jack hammer of the sort that might have been available to the miners at

the turn of the century. This might have been an exploratory shaft intended merely to yield rock samples. Maybe they ran out of money or were too dispirited to continue. Maybe whatever bad juju they had cultivated by starting this operation to begin with had caught up with them and they were forced to run for their lives.

Forty feet down this narrow passage Nunce was forced onto his hands and knees. The overhang that was encountered seemed like a petrified cloud of smog. To George it seemed the remains of something expansive and fungible if not exactly alive.

The narrowness of the confines forced George to push the flashlight in front of him on the ground. So awkward was this position he misidentified the metal door in front of him. He initially saw it as just another bend in the tunnel.

Trying to maneuver around it, he ran into the shaft wall. Only then did he realize he was at an end point.

The door was better described as a hatch. And rather than a nob it sported a large valve at its center of the sort to be found on a submarine hatch. In fact, the whole structure seemed taken from a submarine. It was concave and made of stainless steel. Its hinges were re-enforced with rubber at the edges. As if it was holding back a flood. But its strangest attribute was that it seemed brand new. In no way could it have been installed during the 1920s (which Nunce had already reckoned would have been the latest date this shaft could have been worked). The Japanese soldier would have had no hand in its construction. As neither would the MPs who had been dispatched to find him if they had stumbled on the shaft themselves.

The hatch was the result of a full-fledged engineering and masonry project. There was no space between its edge and the surrounding rock. It was built to a tolerance precise enough to suggest design by modern computer. Furthermore, its purpose was not related to mining. Couldn't be. There was neither liquid nor noxious gas in the shaft that required staving off by this structure. So, it seemed that the hatch was hiding something. Once it was opened, George felt, all would be explained. But this was easier said than done.

Using what little strength he had, George Nunce twisted the valve. Haunted by its mystery, nevertheless, he soon backed away. He reapproached the hatch and gave it a kick and pressed an ear to its exterior trying to see what was being reported. Dead silence,

naturally.

He knocked as a facetious act. Then he turned around to crawl away. When a voice coming from the other side of the hatch asked who it was, George Nunce smacked his forehead on the rock above.

“Yeah? You want something?” the voice asked George. “Yeah? Anything?”

Nunce could see the valve being turned from the inside. But he was in no condition to flee. He held the flashlight toward the door and watched what was revealed.

Chapter Seven: Akuśalakarmapatha ("The Cause of Suffering is Desire")

The man on the other side of the hatch was small, white faced, and subtly ill-formed. He had a bowl cut just like Moe Howard's. Likely he had rendered it himself by simply cutting around the perimeter of a worn hat.

"Whaddya want anyway?" the man asked George Nunce who was doing his best to right himself.

It took George a second to realize he was being addressed.

"Who are you?" George asked the man.

"None ya business," the man said. "No way!"

"No?"

"I could ask you the same just as easily," the man said. "I mean, being that I *live* here. And you don't."

George Nunce asked the strange man if he had anything to do with him being summoned to the Area.

"They didn't tell you nothing," the man said. "Well, they never do. No, you're not the first of your kind that I've seen wandering around out here. But you got guts coming down the shaft all by yourself. Most see the dead body halfway in and turn around. I like it that way," he said. "I like my privacy obviously. And the dead POW helps."

If George wanted, the white-faced man said, he would tell him everything he knew about the Area.

"It'd take five seconds, but I will," he said and opened the hatch a little wider. "You found out the hard way, I guess, that the Brass ain't big on excess verbiage. They have a plan for you, but telling you about it is not part of it. They don't think of themselves as in the people business."

According to the man, George was one of a series of technology professionals that the Brass brought out here for the purpose of fixing their machines.

"You're gonna ask me what machine and I'm gonna tell you that I don't fucking know," he said to George. "That's how it always works with these encounters," he said. "You guys always assume me as part of the system. I'm motherfucking telling you I'm not part of the system and never will be. Everything I know about this place I'm telling you up front. Which is nothing. I know they're out there. But you have to realize I'm outside of the power structure. I've been living here on my own out here for fifteen years. As a hermit, you might say. And the only thing I can tell you is that they know of my presence. I'm a trespasser, but they don't seem to make a big deal of it. I think they don't make a big deal because they know I mean them no harm. In a sense I been here before them. This was a missile base before they turned it into a secret lab or whatever they got going on up in the mountains. There was once an ICBM silo rising out of this foothill. Now it's my home. You're standing at my home's back door," the man said. "The hidden entrance, so to speak. Which was why I was surprised you were there. Or at least bothered to knock."

He gave his name as Francis P. Johnson. He further claimed that he had not spent more than three hours in another person's company combined in the past twelve years. It was obviously the way he liked it. He survived entirely by his wits and by the eighteen

hundred a month stipend the government gave him as disability for a club foot. Eighteen hundred a month was plenty out here as he had free rent for life. The electricity was still on in the silo for as long as the generator that provided it was supplied with gas. Francis made his supply runs four times a year along the same path that Mo Spike had taken the day before. He had an ATV and multiple eighty-gallon plastic tanks to store his food and water.

The ICBM was long gone but the computer controls and satellite-based telemetry unit that had guided it was still here, allowing him internet access. Nowadays, a man could live like a hermit comfortably if only he could get on-line. Basically Francis P. Johnson wanted for nothing. He even enjoyed these periodic visits from lost souls wondering after their purpose here in this part of the world.

He would in such situations invite in whatever poor little lamb he encountered. He was proud of his hutch and wanted to show it off. He thought this lifestyle demonstrated a level of independence that he was keen to advertise. Ordinary folk would look at Francis P. and declare him a sad neurotic. But he saw in himself a spirit akin to the first settlers of the area. He like them eked out an existence from a supremely hostile environment. Unlike them, he had access to all the incest porn he could handle.

He had nothing to hide (even though all he did was hide).

"When's the last time you had yourself an ice-cold Coke," Francis asked George pointing him towards what could be designated as a living room. This station had an enormous silo above it at whose zenith was placed a six-thousand-pound steel blast shield on the far side of the foothill. They had entered the station through a concrete-lined tunnel that George assumed was designed to absorb the exhaust if the ICBM had been launched. The exhaust tunnel was at the bottom of a pit. Francis had converted the pit into a circular living room with a reclaimed couch on one side flanked by orange crates on the other.

According to Francis, little time was spent in this "living room," as it was such a pain in the ass to get down to. Mostly he used the small apartment the base had allocated to its former occupants. Apart from the control room there was a barracks, a single large bathroom with chem toilet, and a kitchen whose nineteen nineties vintage appliances were gradually failing. Also, there was a munitions closet with automatic rifles intended for use, one

supposed, if the base was under attack from outside. Also, there was a medical closet whose salient potion was a bottle of cyanide capsules intended for use (again, one supposed) if the battle was all but lost. The soldiers who manned this base had all made a vow not to give up the launch codes under any circumstances. It was impossible to say presently how real the threat of collective suicide for them was.

Francis was speaking to George as if he was another pioneer who like him had spent the last twenty years apart from civilization and needed reminders of it at every turn.

"I'll take a Perrier with a lime wedge," George said to him from the living room. He spoke low enough so that he believed he wasn't being heard. Hardly a man who was inured to the charms of the modern world, nevertheless, George felt this revelation of Francis' underground apartment to be entirely anti-climactic. He would have been satisfied only if something far greater than Francis' jaundiced nature had been revealed to him. Something wild and extra-logical, like a super-intelligent extra-terrestrial presence. He had lived long enough to have inspected many an apartment, underground or otherwise. He wanted to feel the embrace of an alien God rather, to be manipulated and stung repeatedly by the rows of tentacles emanating from the monstrous creature's face. This to him would have seemed like a culmination. Everything else had registered as a massive disappointment.

The only mystery to Francis, as far as Nunce was concerned, was why the Brass had let him stay here seemingly against all their paranoid rules.

"I think they've forgotten I'm here," he said when returning with the Coke. "For starters, we're thirty miles away from the nearest checkpoint. And I average only about five trips a year outside. And then I ingress and egress only at night."

From what Nunce had seen about the security around here, however, such precautions would be woefully inadequate. He wouldn't have been surprised if there had been a database cataloging every grain of sand on the property. He had witnessed the Brass' mania for subterfuge firsthand the other day in the form of the killer drone. Furthermore, he felt a set of eyes heavy upon him at all times. He assumed it was part of the protocol. He assumed any real intruder on this base would be attacked within the first hour. It was all pre-programmed and de-humanizing. He

assumed there was no aspect of moral judgment to it.

Discounting the notion that Francis was actually the opportunistic hermit he advertised himself to be, Nunce sought another explanation.

“You working with them?” he asked Francis P. Johnson after shot-gunning the Coke. “They want something from me but are afraid to ask for it. For some reason. I’m a captive audience obviously. But, somehow, they don’t feel confident approaching me directly. So, they hire freaks like you to leach it out of me. You’re gonna ask me at some point what it is I do for a living. You’re gonna invite me to speculate at some point why I’m here.”

George recalled that in one of the emails he had received from the Brass the appearance of a confidentiality agreement stretching past four thousand words resided. He assumed buried in there somewhere was language stipulating that George shouldn’t reveal to a third party what he was doing here even if it was so much speculation.

“You want to set me up, maybe as a loyalty test,” he told Francis. “Or as a way of swindling me out of my pay. You’re the Brass’s spy, I’d wager, planted here to get me to squawk. But now that I have the drop on you, you should know that I ain’t gonna squawk. Not now or ever,” he said. “I’ve been elected or saved or something like it. It happened to me just the other day. So you should know I’m beyond all of it, beyond all the bullshit about national security or whatever you’re doing out here. A fucking gamma ray cannon? Is that it?” he asked Francis. “You’ve gotten word I’m guessing that the aliens are invading. From a hostile planet orbiting Barnard’s Star. So now you want a gamma ray cannon to blast

whatever those things are out of the universe. It's a natural inclination surely. But since you don't ask nicely, my answer to you is GFYN. As in *Go Fuck Yourself Nightly*. No, you don't have to do so all at once. You can wait until you are alone and in more comfortable surroundings. It doesn't have to be done as an act of contrition. I'm explaining to you merely that which I'm requiring you to do: *GFYN*. I'm offering you a reasonable alternative. Because you can see now that I will not cooperate with you."

The edges of Francis P. Johnson's bowl cut were serrated. Which perhaps produced a soothing sensation for him when he ran his fingers along it.

"Fancy a game of air hockey?" he asked George while pointing to a second exhaust tunnel on the silo's far side. There, the table was unplugged and covered up with a Winnie-the-Pooh bed sheet with a urine stain at its center.

Nice touch really that, George Nunce thought and moved toward it. He wanted to see what truly lay underneath it. Some sort of mind control mechanism perhaps? Or maybe it was just an empty box that they intended to stuff George into the moment after his assassination.

Perhaps it was some middling combination of these two considerations that he had not yet fully considered.

Chapter Eight: Suffering (Duhkha)

The way George handled Francis P. Johnson, the way he thought it was best to neutralize him, that is, was to dangle him off the forty-foot drop onto the slightly concave the floor of the silo. This, he thought, was the way to get him talking. He assumed that whatever Francis' allegiance was to his bosses he still didn't want to die. He assumed that he would face retribution for squealing but at least Francis'd have a fighting chance of escape at that point.

Francis P. Johnson was a small man. But there was something about his condition that made him even more lightweight than would have been guessed at.

"Look," George Nunce said to him as he shook him at the ankles. "I can't do this all day. My hands are gonna get tired eventually. And then? Well, and then..."

He couldn't see the expression on Francis' face entirely. From this crooked angle it looked like he was in the midst of praying. Or maybe meditating. He might have been simply resigned to his fate and had a wish for George to get on with it. Maybe he was that maniacal regarding his allegiance to the government. Or maybe he wasn't wholly convinced Nunce would go through with it. He had to be convinced otherwise. George was telling Francis constantly that he might not mean to drop him, but he would be forced to

because his arms were tired. He was waving him about like soggy laundry on the line to support his contention that this might be so.

Francis P. Johnson couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds including his baggy clothes. He was four foot eleven and thin, but it was still surprising to George how weak his resistance was. George had incapacitated him with a single punch to the gut and subsequent bear hug. Presently George's elbows were braced on the metal gate surrounding the silo. Using this fulcrum, he felt strong enough to bear Francis aloft for at least another hour. Which was another way of saying that he had yet to make a conscious decision about whether to drop him. He was troubled that he wouldn't have that lie to tell himself about having had no intention to drop the hermit. This by itself would not be a decisive factor in his decision. It was simply an argument in the direction of letting him live.

Maybe if he helped Francis up, George would be attacked as retribution. This consideration by itself was enough to force George to let go. Removing his hands from Francis' bare ankles, Nunce held them palm down briefly. Like Buddha he pointed to the earth with one of them. Then he watched as for an instant his empty hands hovered just above Francis' blackened soles.

When Francis fell, he moaned a bit but neglected to scream. Such stoicism in the face of his death George Nunce found deeply admirable. Momentarily it filled him with regret. As if he had underestimated Francis P. Johnson wildly. As if he had gotten him all wrong.

He hit with a splat on the concrete, neck first.

"Cool beans," George said upon hearing the splat and wondered how it usually sounded when a person was dropped onto concrete neck first from forty feet. Perhaps there was something about Francis' unusual physical condition that made the splat more pronounced. Perhaps his bones were partially gelatinous, and this made for a truly disturbing sound effect when blunt force trauma was applied.

At the very least the splat was a signal that Francis P. Johnson was either dead or fatally wounded.

"You hear that sound coming from your own body, it's best to schedule an appointment with the undertaker stat," George

Nunce told himself and walked into the apartment's kitchen. "Not the motherfucking doctor, not the ER," he said. "The *undertaker*, man, and stat. You're not coming back from that *splat* ever," he said. "If it's made by your body, you were fortunate to have heard it in the first place."

George briefly wondered if it would behoove him to clean up the mess below.

"Gravity killed him, not me," he said and went in search of victuals.

He reasoned that either the Brass knew about Francis' unfortunate end or they didn't. If they knew about it, let them fucking clean it up themselves, the swine. If they didn't know about it, there was no need for George to clean it up. As, per Francis' own testimony, nobody would be the wiser. Francis P. Johnson could be left like this for eternity. Or until Mother Nature recycled him. If queried about it, George could claim that it was either suicide or an accident. But if he cleaned it up, he was admitting guilt beforehand.

That was that. The key to abiding with a corpse, he thought, was never to look it in the eye. A man saw a body in the decomposed condition and his first instinct was to do something about it. But if you didn't look him in the eye everything would be fine. George thought not looking was the easiest goddamn thing to do. Doing nothing. George thought it was nothing at all just to ignore something for an extended period.

In the base kitchen, there was a fuck-ton of non-perishable items coupled with a serious amount of frozen pizzas that took up the lion's share of space in the freezer.

"I'll imagine myself happy at some point," George Nunce said to himself after popping a pepperoni and mushroom ten-incher into the toaster oven. He hovered around it covetously as it cooked. In the meantime, he availed himself of the apartment's Coke, opening two cans at once. Hadn't realized how thirsty he was until he had resolved his little problem. Dropping Francis P. Johnson on his head from the lip of a missile silo had been the best decision he had made all week. Now he was his old self. He could potentially stay

here if he wanted. He felt weirdly comfortable here like a rabbit in its hutch. He could see the appeal of the place for Francis.

He hadn't looked at the computer setup yet, but it seemed that in this missile silo there was everything that was needed to live a cloistered existence halfway into the twenty-first century's first third. Amazon didn't deliver out here, but this might have been the only box left unchecked vis-à-vis what was required of a modern domicile. The most seductive thing about the place was the silence that enveloped both the inside and the outside of the base. It was like a half-death that one became a part of the longer one abided in such a place. Its owners could have easily turned it into a luxury retreat, a type of Sedona-area spa for those on a tight budget. Which only led one to speculate why they hadn't already. There was a mysterious aspect to this place that suggested all appearances were false appearances and rather than a comfy hutch the silo was an ordinary death trap. George Nunce might have been marked for death just for having wandered in. This would have been an absurd circumstance, but it might have been the case. After all, he had been here to fulfill some sort of mission. He was a serious pro executing a work contract! He wasn't supposed to be wandering around looking in abandoned mine shafts for kicks. He was supposed to be doing something else (though lord knew what that might be).

The best thing for him to do was split. After which he could see if he was being followed. If those in charge of this Area wanted to contact him, they certainly could do so. If they had intended to kill him, he thought he would be slightly better off making himself a moving target. Staying here would be too creepy, especially having to avoid Francis P. Johnson's mangled corpse. It had been several days out here waiting around and he was out of patience. The Brass might have gotten cold feet and called the whole thing off. They might have assumed a certain level of common sense in George to see himself out eventually. It might not have been the correct assumption, but they might have done so. They had hired him, after all, because he was so resolved and intelligent. Hadn't they? Thus, he should have reasoned that he was not needed any longer. It was an awful thing to do but it certainly was possible. There was no evidence now to counter this argument. And it might well have been a mistake from the start.

The ATV Francis had alluded to was stored in what amounted

to this missile base's front entrance, in a tiny garage with a six-inch-thick steel blast door that likely had been designed to withstand an atomic blast.

"Good engineering," Nunce said to himself seeing how easily the blast doors swung open. Before leaving, he had gorged himself on Francis' larder, showered, and made sure the cargo in the trailer that was hooked up to the ATV's back was steady. He had taken twenty gallons of gas, a dozen twenty-ounce Cokes, and what he judged to be a three-day supply of toasted pizzas that he had wrapped in paper towels to keep them free from dirt. Come sundown he had resolved to head out parallel to the main road they had driven in on. It was obviously a dangerous maneuver, but he felt it was the only prudent course of action. He could at the faintest sound of an engine ditch the vehicle in the nearest patch of brush and run.

He needed to split. It was the only real logical course of action for him. The ATV with its manual transmission took some getting used to. But soon he was on the way in daylight. He figured at least for the first day it was safer to see where he was going rather than risk flipping over when contacting a small ridge unexpectedly in the dark.

If whoever oversaw this place wanted to reach out to him, they could certainly do so whenever they felt the need to. Probably the sooner the better. He assumed no good thing would occur hunkering down and waiting to be contacted. He might well be headed to a dead end. He was definitely headed to a place inhospitable to even the ATV. Thus, he would need plenty of lead time if he were to make it all the way to Utah on his own.

Staring back briefly at the receding missile silo, George could see the top shield glimmering slightly in the reddening light as an overstimulated glans preparing to surrender its payload.

Glad to be rid of that, he thought fleetingly. He thought himself for some reason lucky to be alive.

Chapter Nine:

Discontent

(Dukkha)

Upon hitting the incline into the Ruby Mountains, the terrain turned rocky and impassable. Thus, George eventually decided to risk using the narrow shoulder. No other way up there except to walk. Which he had ruled out given that he was averse to any type of strenuous physical activity.

It looked like only a couple miles to the summit. But in the desert looks could be deceiving. George Nunce was from Ohio. He was inexperienced at judging distances in these western vistas. In fact, it was a day's meandering ride to the peak that he was staring at. It was somewhere over twelve thousand feet.

Presently he was ignorant of such distances. But he didn't really give a damn how far it was as long it promised an opportunity for escape.

This was Nunce's fourth full day spent in this unnamed governmental Area. He had through constant exposure to nothingness gradually lost his anxiety about the future. It was four days, but it might as well have been forty weeks. Where nothing much happened, weirdness occurred. Time distorted in such circumstances. It distorted then strained and broke like strands of pulled-on taffy, only to be reconstituted at some future point. When a man was completely alone, time for him became a meaningless

attribute. In that its value shifted so dramatically and in a random way. Which all led him to wonder if he had been in this place overlong. He had stashed his cellphone, he believed, somewhere in his pack and he was eager to get to a place where it could be used. Once he made a call to anybody, let alone a rental car agency, he was convinced that the entire universe would shift. He knew this place by now as fundamentally unreal.

As it turned out the road's shoulder was soggy and made of small, pulverized stones from the mountains. So, after a couple hundred yards, Nunce had to switch to the road itself. Which he had sworn he wouldn't do when starting out yesterday from the missile silo.

"It wasn't such a bad decision for you, was it?" Nunce heard a voice say when the ATV was idled. *"I mean,"* the voice continued, *"one road in and one road out. Still, we're glad to have you. We're glad to see that you made the only logical choice possible. Which is to get back on the road that brought you here in the first place."*

Clearly audible over the engine's tubercular wheezing, Nunce had for several seconds been convinced that he had finally been driven mad.

"No, it's not that at all," the disembodied voice told George, as he clutched his head. *"Besides, think for a second. Being truly insane is a state where you are convinced absolutely of your own rightness. Nobody in the nuthouse frets about their perceptions. So, this all points to your being as right as rain about so many things. Not least of which is you having made the right decision to come here in the first place."*

The drone floating above him was so quiet as to not be engine-powered at all. Nunce wondered if it was a product of a

technological breakthrough, that it worked on a type of anti-gravity mechanism or maybe through an invisible laser received from a distant base that acted as a sort of energy conduit.

There was a speaker/microphone apparatus somewhere in the drone's guts that was conveying its thoughts. But it was still too high up in a crystalline sky to see.

Eventually Nunce asked the drone why, if it had desired him to stay on the road all along, had Mo Spike routed him miles past it into the Area's interior?

"Nobody ever accused us of taking the path of least of resistance," the drone told him in reply. *"Think of it this way,"* it said. *"If we hadn't sent you on the detour, you would have been wondering after the mysteries of the Area all along. As in what we were hiding there that was crucial to your self-actualization."*

Like so many other Americans, George Nunce considered all government agencies fundamentally corrupt. So, the reason for the Area's existence, i.e., what they were trying to hide, would always remain a mystery to him.

Calmly he told the drone (or whatever presence was speaking through it) that he had been on the clock ever since landing at the regional Nevada airport.

"Don't start in with me," he said. "None of this is my fault."

He left it that. He felt it was prudent to elide all that had happened back in the missile silo. The Brass could infer his capital crime if they were interested in doing so. But in a way he thought it was none of their motherfucking business. In that they had left him out here to play. So, he had played.

How else did they expect a man to behave once liberated from all societal dictates? He had been abandoned by the Brass. Or at least he felt that he had been. Lashing out was part of George Nunce's nature. That was why, along with other noxious personality traits, he had been prescribed the blue pills.

Meekly he asked the drone why it was he had been having trouble of late recalling his former, non-Nevada existence.

"Not that it's any great shakes," he told it. "Not that I have

anywhere important to be, anything great to do once I've fulfilled my obligation to you."

For at least thirty seconds the drone was silent as if cultivating a narrowly tailored response.

"Under great stress," it finally said, "men forget themselves."

"What is it you want me to do here?" George Nunce asked it. "What sort of operation do you have underway?"

The drone told George Nunce that everything would be explained once he made it to the top of the pass.

"We have a base deep inside the mountain," it said to him. "You will see a giant metal door to your left. You should stop and stand at the x in the center of the road. Our facial recognition protocol will take care of everything. You should behave as you are directed," it said to him. "When you are told to proceed you should proceed. But only after you have reached the X."

Seconds later the drone flew behind the looming mountains.

"I wonder," George thought, "what would happen if I took off in the opposite direction. I wonder how long it would take for them to hunt me down. Maybe a few seconds. I wonder if they think it would be worth it to kill me. All this staging and the indirect communication. Now they would have two dead bodies to see to on their property. To them it might not be a big deal. But there was some set up time in luring me out here. Somebody must have signed off. I wonder if they would hover over my charred remains and

declare the entire mission a clusterfuck. They couldn't have possibly foreseen that I would have gone rogue on them like that. That I would be my own man to the end and have made a run for it rather than comply with their wishes."

Of course, if he executed this plan, he would soon be dead. Presently he was convinced that this was an undesirable outcome for him relative to the alternatives.

I wouldn't have my questions answered, George thought starting up the pass at a fifteen mile an hour clip.

Well, that wouldn't be the worst outcome, but it would certainly be annoying given his present state of confusion. It would be an anti-climax for him mostly. This was not to say that he would call an end to this experiment. He assumed when dealing with the Brass real information would be portioned out like water in the desert. The power structure's entire reason for being perhaps was to keep proles like him in the dark about their fate. Perhaps they had a legitimate national security interest for proceeding with things in this way. But the story they told him assuredly would only be half-formed at best. At worst it would be a gaggle of lies. Probably Nunce had known this before he had taken the assignment. But now it seemed an outrage. After all, he had been suffering ever since setting foot in this Area. Nobody had proffered an apology to him yet. Information was being ladled out on a need-to-know basis. He felt that any more mistreatment of this sort and he would throw up his hands and quit. He assumed he could quit (though he had not actually read the fine print of anything he had electronically signed). He thought there was no real need for the Brass to maintain this level of secrecy apart from that they were equipped with assholes tight enough to squeeze coal into diamonds. The job itself would likely be revealed as a farce. Perhaps there was a microwave oven at a shared kitchen deep inside the base that was in need of repair. Out here they loved secrecy for the sake of secrecy. They didn't see it as a necessary evil so much as a standard protocol that one was obliged to follow to the letter.

Once arriving at the foretold X ten minutes up the road, George, with all these doubts weighing on him, drove past it for forty feet just beyond the pass's zenith. From this spot he could look down on western Utah, to more mountains, and presumably freedom. There was what looked like a small town in the valley that perhaps might have been the nearest civilian installation to the Area. If it was so, Nunce was surprised that it had been allowed to stand. The federal government could only annex so much land. But, then again, they could create a cover story that would entitle them to enforce their will beyond this Area's borders. Maybe this vista was all government property as far as the eye could see. If so, he was curious about who was occupying that town. What was going on down there? Also, what was the town's relationship to the no doubt enormous facility inside the mountain that overlooked them?

As he rose from the stolen vehicle, Nunce craned his neck skyward to see if a drone was following. Devoid of such a positive ID, and devoid of a real plan to do otherwise than what the drone had requested of him, he remounted the vehicle and slowly slipped it into reverse.

He parked the vehicle on the narrow shoulder and took several bites out of a green pepper and sausage confection and gathered several Diet Cokes into his backpack. Then, as per request, he moved into the large red X and faced left.

The facility's blast door had been camouflaged to fade in perfectly with the surrounding rock. So much so it would have been entirely missed by George if he had not been made aware of its presence in advance. Even as it was opening with a barely audible hum it was hard to make out from the surrounding rock. To George it seemed part of the mountain was spontaneously fissuring. Despite his foreknowledge, he was alarmed at the vision. It took him at least thirty seconds before the spell of the camouflage was removed.

An amplified voice coming from inside the opening told him to walk forward.

"Be more specific," George Nunce said. He asked the voice how far forward. He wanted to know if he should venture all the way into the cave's shadows or stop just on its lip and wait for further instructions.

The voice was silent for a time. To George it felt as if the programming behind it was hashing out a response.

"We can do this any way you want, man," it

said to George after a while. *“Easy or hard. The choice is yours,”* it said.

Nunce was inexplicably nervous about stepping inside the enclosure and was stalling for time.

“Look,” the voice said to him, *“Are you going to...”*

As he stepped forward, George saw the coyote of days before. It was hiding in the brush with its head down staring at his progress. And on his forehead had either been carved or branded the *vayu* mudra:



Nunce thought this was an ordinary bit of cruelty. Presently he swore revenge on its perpetrator.

And despite all reason to the contrary, he couldn't help assuming all these recent events were inter-related.

Chapter Ten: Impermanence (Anicca)

The human figure that finally greeted him in the mountain's interior was neither male nor female. Rather, it was some sort of conglomeration of the two. Neither a third sex nor a middle sex, but something empty of sex altogether. And, therefore, pornographically lurid.

"Do you know why you're here?" he (or whatever) asked George Nunce. It might have been a rhetorical question. But coming from this asexual mouth it was difficult to tell. From it, even a simple recitation of George's name would have sounded questioning. There was something gooey about it, maybe half-formed that caused opportunities for misunderstanding at the completion of every phoneme. The voice emerging from it had an accent that was hard to place. The surrounding person had an expressionless but by no means placid face.

The person was dressed in blue jeans and a Tegan and Sara t-shirt culled from their 2010 North American tour. The person wore Birkenstocks and was smoking a cigarette. This last detail proved the most off-putting for George, considering the Stalinist no smoking policies present at all government installations. Perhaps this base was the lone exception to the policy. Or perhaps the person in front of George didn't care. Strange that of all the

disquieting things he had observed thus far in the Area, this was the most disturbing. A smoker. Libertarian though he was, Nunce was about to ask this person to refrain from smoking in front of him.

Instead, he asked the person whether he (or she) was a woman or a man.

"It's not a binary choice," the human presence, whose name to judge by his/her name tag, was Franc Slate, said to Nunce. It fished another Marlboro out of his/her front pocket. Obviously, there was an unhealthy dependency on tobacco at play here. S/he didn't want to smoke so much as need to smoke. There was no volition to the act at all.

George Nunce didn't understand Franc's reply and said so directly.

"I'm not busting balls here unnecessarily," he told Franc and wondered if the great electronic door a hundred yards behind him had closed. He thought he knew the answer but was afraid to seek out a confirmation. Because once he had his status would change from unwilling colleague to prisoner. At which point Franc would be free to blow smoke in his face regardless of OSHA rules.

Of course, George didn't care if Franc was man or woman (or something else). Precisely, he was busting balls unnecessarily. He thought that of all the people who would be assigned to greet him, this hermaphrodite was chosen. Here was an un-person, in George Orwell's formulation. A half-person maybe better described, devoid of the principal attribute that all people regardless of their social circumstances have: gender.

He assumed Franc Slate another disappointment in a constant parade of disappointments. That is, a false projection of authority.

Franc wasn't the one in charge here, couldn't have been.

George was growing impatient for somebody in the know, for somebody who had a legitimate government-sponsored explanation. He had expected to be greeted by a wizened scientist in a lab coat or, even better, a lantern-jawed general whose bullying behavior would be offset by the authority he carried around like a police baton. He (and most certainly it was a He) would know of what he spoke when the briefing started. If he lied to George, it would at least be with the foreknowledge that he was telling a lie. Which was more than one could say about the middle managers that the Brass had at their disposal. These creatures couldn't lie as they were so largely ignorant of the truth. There would be no

malice in their deception. Which infuriated George Nunce to no end. In their bureaucracy, the Brass had carved a loophole out of a moral dilemma. He would be briefed honestly, but nothing would be revealed to him. And when and if he left their presence, he would be even less knowledgeable about the goings-on in this Area than before. Right or wrong this was what Franc Slate represented to him: an apparatchik, a lickspittle, a drone. To him it meant that the truth would never be revealed. Maybe the bureaucracy here had become so overgrown that the truth was too abstract to be communicated in anything but the most spiritual of terms, like a vision of God that was powerful as well as inarticulable simultaneously.

Days before he had been speculating about computer intelligence. As Franc Slate led him down a seemingly endless hall into the mountain's interior, he suddenly realized the brilliance of having such an entity in charge of things. This was opposed to so many failed, pink-faced humans lost in a matrix of their own devising.

"Artificial intelligence, is that it?" George asked Franc when they had walked in silence for long enough that he felt entitled to talk out of turn. "Is that what lies at the center of this base?" he asked. "A massive computer brain directing things and deciding human fate algorithmically like a machine God?"

Franc turned to George. In doing so the cigarette dangling from the bottom lip was revealed.

"Don't know what you mean," Franc said, "by *artificial intelligence*. I mean, I wouldn't know it if I ran into it," he/she said. "Would I? Or put it this way: *why* would I? I've been here all of six months. And most of the work I do on computers is with Adobe Creative Suite. I can barely order stuff off the government website."

According to Franc Slate, there was a pecking order around here of which s/he was barely a part of.

"They told me to wait for you, that's all,"

Franc said anticipating George's next question. "At the south entrance. Yes, the *south entrance*. Nobody uses the south entrance as far as I know. I had always assumed it was made for you or someone like you. Somebody with a special sort of clearance. And that you would know exactly what you were doing when you got here. That maybe you were my boss and that you would tell me all about how this place works. Rather than the other way around."

The Teagan and Sara t-shirt Franc had picked up while seeing the duo last year in Las Vegas. At least Franc thought it was Teagan and Sara. Now that s/he thought of it, it might have been Teagan and Sara's doppelgangers from parallel universe AS-12, Hedvige and Danya. They played the same songs as Teagan and Sara but in different keys. They favored green eyeliner rather than blue eyeliner. Hard to differentiate, it really was, with all the flashbulbs going off constantly at their concerts.

Blessed with a BFA in graphic design from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson New York, Franc Slate had obtained employment at this facility coloring digital Easter eggs. These eggs were intended for God-knew-who and to be delivered God-knew-when for a purpose as murky as the hiring process that allowed Franc entrance to the underground base to begin with.

"There's a threadbare quality control process the rationale for I have no idea," Franc said concerning his efforts these many months. "I give the files to them on time. And on occasion they look at them," s/he said. "There's a SharePoint site we use for file exchange," s/he said. "The feedback I get from them never goes past three words," s/he said. "It's always something like 'less optimism' or 'too lighthearted.' You get the feeling that whoever's doing the reviewing is making it up as they go along," s/he said. "Well, that's fine in most circumstances but not this one," s/he said. "Out here, if only for their own sake, you would assume people

would take their duties seriously. You would assume they would be intent on a task and its completion if only so that they could live to see another day.”

According to Franc Slate, the Area was a dangerous environment to operate within. It was only tangentially because of the climate, the resultant isolation, and the Brass’ totalitarian management style.

“There’s something the Brass’s got stashed down there, deep down below,” Franc said to George pointing directly below his/her feet. “I mean fucking *miles* down below. Everything’s down there. Up here, it’s all froth. Down there is where it all goes on. Something dark and terrible is down there,” Franc Slate said. “Even from up here if you sit at your desk quietly for extended periods you can hear it. It comes up from the floor. Sounds like human bodies being ground up for meal. It’s a mixture of machine noises and screams. And you can imagine what it sounds like from up close. And then why they’re all so fucking afraid of it. And maybe even why they brought you out here from the start.”

Speaking of such occurrences in an emotionless monotone, Franc was not looking for an acolyte. So it seemed to George that here was honest testimony being conferred at last. Immediately he was sorry about doubting Franc, about having had the creeps while in his/her presence.

“When the noises start,” he said to Franc, “is there a sort of whispering that precedes it? Not any sort of singular whispering, but more like an un-synched whispering chorus with each voice obscuring the words of another? A whispering of the damned is a good way to put it,” George Nunce asked. “Those who whisper

because their throats are so ravaged with screaming that they have no other choice but to do so? They speak in mono-syllabic bursts in a language comprehensible only to themselves. To all others it sounds like the word “milk” is being repeated constantly. It sounds like they’re asking for milk in an infinite number of inflections. It sounds like they’re mad for the stuff even though if you were in their presence there would be no desire whatsoever on your part to give it to them.”

Hearing this soliloquy of George’s made Franc Slate smile for some reason. It also made him/her nostalgic for the good old days back in Vegas. Where even for one such as him/her life seemed a party and Tegan and Sara (or their doppelgangers) had never sounded better:

*Woooo! 3, 2, 1, go!/
Have you heard the news? Everyone’s talkin’/
Life is good ‘cause everything’s awesome/
Lost my job, there’s a new opportunity/
More free time for my awesome community!/
I feel more awesome than an awesome possum/
Dip my body in chocolate frostin’/
Three years later wash off the frostin’/
Smellin’ like a blossom, everything is awesome/
Stepped in mud, got new brown shoes.../*

It’s awesome to win and it’s awesome to lose, Franc Slate said. And somehow in the scrofulous presence of George Nunce s/he was more convinced of this truth than ever. Every instance of pain, every stabbing bout of loneliness suggested an ultimate relief from loneliness and pain. Thus, suffering was to be welcomed. If only for the promised relief that

suffering incubated within it. An unwilling outsider, Franc Slate understood this to be true. In George Nunce, s/he sensed a kindred spirit. S/he seemed in many ways even more fucked-up than George. S/he had twin red spirals for eyes and a pinwheel for a heart. S/he knew s/he was doomed. But s/he warred against the knowledge constantly. And this left him/her profoundly conflicted in the same way that God was conflicted, full of remorse and joy over what s/he had done. Like God, Franc was completely amoral, as s/he couldn't measure the rightness of any particular action apart from how it felt to him/her. S/he reached out and constantly encountered only his/her own hand, reaching in. Doing good was no use for one such as him/her. S/he was doomed. Being near him/her, one was constantly relieved that one was not quite doomed. Franc Slate was a sin eater, the scapegoat of modern America. It was unfair, Franc thought, but there it was. But, then again, s/he thought, it was unfair to all those near him/her, too.

The workstation they had set up for Franc was in a corner of a tiny room a quarter mile into the tunnel.

"Well, here's one," s/he said clicking on the notification message s/he had received from SharePoint. The Easter egg image under review had been of an otherwise unremarkable surmise. It

had replicated the skyline of downtown Cleveland, circa 1988. Yes, downtown Cleveland, circa 1988. That skyline was dominated by the Terminal Tower, rendered on the egg's curved surface in tones of sepia and gray. In Franc's humble opinion here was a masterpiece. S/he had converted the image to PDF and loaded it onto SharePoint to await form feedback from whatever/whoever it might be.

The link in the notifying email took a user to the marked-up image.

“Oh,” was how the digital note in yellow placed over the image began, *“I been to Cleveland, Oh-High-Oh! I know the city’s contours, its mechanical-industrial heart. I walked along Lake Erie’s polluted shore. And do you want to know something? Do you really want to know?”*

That was it. Franc Slate didn't know if s/he was expected to respond. It had never been explained to him/her what the sign-off process around here was.

Chapter Eleven: Freedom from Fear (Abhaya Mudra)

In the empty room where George Nunce wound up crashing there was a shimmering vinyl floor.

“Oh, it’s fine,” Nunce told whatever consciousness might be observing him remotely. He dug his nails into the floor’s soft surface. The floor was soft enough to allow him to press down for several millimeters and leave a temporary indentation. He had no real thought about why the floor in this room was vinyl. Perhaps it had been intended as someone’s living quarters. Perhaps the concrete floors of the other areas of this base had proven too daunting to be accepted by the workers who labored here.

Nunce had chosen the room at random after wandering the base’s seemingly endless corridors for twelve hours. It was otherwise empty. The vinyl floor was its only unique feature. By then he thought that one place was as good as another. It was quiet

here, or at least could have been assumed as such. It seemed completely beside the point regarding the base's operation. He liked this about it most of all.

He had improvised a pillow with the empty plastic Coke bottles and the scotch tape that he had borrowed from Franc. It was fine if he slept on his side facing the wall. In one of the communal kitchens there was a first aid kit that came equipped with a mylar blanket.

The vinyl floor was soft enough for George. He was used to it somehow. Apparently, he had experienced a fair amount of physical hardship while growing up. It wasn't ideal of course but he couldn't be bothered with the requisite outrage that such thoughtlessness should have rightly engendered in a man who, to put it mildly, had been put through the wringer. Such thoughtlessness on the part of the Brass was hardly surprising. He liked the room regardless, and he liked the vinyl floor. It reminded him of something dear to him. Maybe as a child he liked to sleep on the floor. It reminded him of something out of an imaginary childhood.

Every so often people would pass by in the hallway. Quickly George learned to ignore them.

"I turned to face the wall and tucked myself into the fetal position," he told Franc Slate several days into his stay when he had wandered into Franc's work area. Franc had been hard at work on his/her latest iteration of the Cleveland skyline egg. S/he was using Adobe Illustrator as his/her primary tool. Bereft of any real direction, s/he had resolved to make as many versions of the Cleveland egg as possible for just in case. S/he would load all of them onto SharePoint in an attempt to curry favor. Lonesome for Las Vegas, nevertheless, s/he wanted to keep his/her job. S/he thought eventually the lines of communication between him/her and the men who s/he worked with would be improved. S/he thought at that point it would be just like any other job albeit with a far greater commute. But s/he was worried that s/he was not complying with the wishes of his/her bosses. S/he was worried that s/he was letting so many hidden people down.

S/he thought it was monstrous that the Brass hadn't gotten around to on-boarding George in earnest. S/he told him this bluntly.

"I don't think they expected you to show up," Franc said. This was a weak explanation for him having to sleep on the vinyl floor.

"It seems to take them weeks to do what they should be able to do in a few hours. So maybe they didn't think you were coming and were caught off-guard. But now that they know you're here, at least the gears are turning. It'll take a couple of days maybe to set everything right."

George Nunce wasn't looking for sympathy.

"The only thing I give a shit about," he said to Franc, "is the size of my check at the end of this. I'm on the clock now and I've been on the motherfucking clock for a whole fucking week," he said. "If they want to fuck with me, I can fuck with them right back. I know my rights under federal labor law. I don't give a shit about whatever waiver they made me sign. I know my rights. As an American. Lincoln freed the slaves long ago, didn't he? I'm telling you right now, I'm billing them for everything. For fucking *everything*. But if they want to negotiate with me at some point, fine. It's their fault not mine that I'm not being productive as of now. I'm ready to work. Even with this stiff neck from sleeping on their motherfucking floor, I'm ready to go to work on whatever gizmo they need repaired. On whatever computer program they need written. Or what have you."

Pausing in his labors briefly, Franc Slate asked George what exactly his technical specialty was.

"Don't have one per se," he told Slate. "More or less," he said,

“I’m an intelligent person with intelligence to sell. You explain something to me once and that’s all the explanation it takes. Generally.”

George Nunce had a certificate in HVAC repair from a community college in Ashtabula, Ohio. But that wasn’t the half of his knowledge.

“I’m an avid reader,” he told Franc Slate and from his wallet removed the span of multi-colored library cards from the Ashtabula area. With him, days were mostly spent in such public libraries versing himself on matters technical and philosophical. He had read *Beyond Good and Evil*, just as he had read approximately half of Steven Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*. Mostly he liked to use the library internet free of charge and avail of himself of its wisdom and scholarship. He worked sporadically, he recalled, if he worked at all. But this didn’t mean he was necessarily unqualified for this mission. His stock message to all those employers who would inquire after his services was that he was willing to learn. Of course he was fucking willing to learn! He knew something about quantum mechanics, for example, from Hawking’s book. He knew how weird it was, even though he wasn’t prepared to say why.

His relative tyro status when it came to the digitized brains of weapons of mass destruction did not mean he was an easy mark when it came to being ripped off by Uncle Sam.

“They pay me just like they’d pay Bill motherfucking Gates,” George Nunce declared when contemplating the lack of a formal orientation put forward by the Brass. “I mean, I’m a serious pro just like him,” George said. “I got better places to be than this,” he said. “I’ll give ‘em another week max to get off their asses and identify the problem,” he said to Franc. “I’m not helpless, I’m not a child,” he said. “It makes me mad when people assume that I am.”

According to George Nunce, he had another assignment at a waste disposal plant in Maryland that he had turned down for this assignment. He lacked top secret clearance, but it had never come up in his official correspondence. By degrees he was assured why this was. The Brass apparently had their heads up their collective ass. Eventually it would sort itself out. But you could say that for everything. All war would come to an end, for example, due to the forces of entropy. By itself, a satisfactory result proved nothing. The art of management was to war against entropy. To make sure that it was never a determinant force. George thought in this instance entropy had won.

In the communal kitchen abutting Franc’s work area, there were Hot Pockets of every stripe that both George and Franc had availed themselves of regardless of who they were originally intended for.

“You say there’s an elevator somewhere,” George said to Franc Slate on the third day of his internment (for this was what it had come to feel like) at the underground base, “that goes deep underground. Maybe a forty foot drop every second. You say this is where the real action is. Deep underground. And that there’s only way to reach it.”

Still no word from Franc’s mystery reviewer, but just because s/he had nothing to do didn’t mean that s/he was disposed to help George Nunce out.

“Everything around here’s facial recognition,” s/he said to George explaining how access worked. “So, to get in you’re going to need clearance in advance,” s/he said. “I mean, I don’t think the elevator has buttons on the inside or out,” s/he said. “It scans your face and takes you where you need to go, the

only place where you *can* go. And I don't believe—and I've never tested this out—there's any way to crack the code. You're either in or you're out," Franc said. "And I'm also assuming you'd know in advance if you're in. Because it's only logical that this is so."

Nunce thought a minute and stared at his soggy egg and cheese breakfast. Oh, these were even more disgusting than he remembered. He had once subsisted on Hot Pockets almost solely for several years and hated them. There was an aftertaste to them like stale cooking oil. Their re-introduction to his diet was triggering all manner of bad memories. There was a taste of life's various disappointments, of poverty and loneliness, wrapped into a singular package. He always thought when he made it (whatever that meant) such fare as Hot Pockets would be banished from his cuisine. Ditto with microwave pizza. With microwave pizza, the thought always occurred in him that he wasn't eating the real McCoy. He wasn't eating the real McCoy because he couldn't afford the real McCoy. Pizza Hut didn't take food stamps as far as George Nunce was aware. During those days he ate because he needed to survive. Poverty had come along and destroyed one of life's sovereign pleasures. Now here he was at work being made to experience the sense of privation all over again.

Maybe if Franc showed him the pneumatic elevator, it would open. Just as the human heart would open when confronted by some pathetic creature in need of care.

"I'll hide in an alcove maybe and wait for somebody to get in," George said to Franc. "Or I'll just turn sideways and push my way through. I'll put my hand over my face to avoid detection," he said. "I'll claim a mix up by the systems if I'm detected. There's no IDs worn around here anyways. You said it yourself, Franc. But once I'm in, I'm likely in all the way. If they want to remove me, I'll say go ahead. Then I'll stick 'em with an impromptu invoice. And then I'll be free as a bird for the rest of my days."

In such an eventuality he would head straight to Vegas and live it up with an intent to expense the government later. Yes, he'd stay at the Bellagio where he would feast on room service-ordered steak

and oysters. Then champagne as filtered through a thousand dollar an hour hooker's snatch. Of course, he would expense her too under the category of a medical necessity. He thought it was all set up for him to do so. They wouldn't know what hit them when George Nunce got through with them! He might well rent a car and make a holiday out of his return to Ashtabula. It would be a great trip, a memorable once-in-a-lifetime experience. It wouldn't happen, however, until he took initiative. It all depended on him getting to the elevator first.

"Which way is it?" he asked Franc in a surprisingly whiny tone. This was the first indication that he wasn't having such a good time. Prior to coming here, he had believed he could handle anything the Brass had to dish out. But he felt his resolve slipping.

Chapter Twelve: Liberation (Nirvana)

He was growing ever more worried about his place in the world. Having settled into the Area, George Nunce was having a hard time recalling that there was a greater area that encompassed it. Increasingly he defined himself by all that was happening inside the base's confines. Which was jackshit. He had seemingly been forgotten by those who had summoned him here. This gnawed at his self-worth greatly, as he couldn't seem to recall with any accuracy his life before this life.

He defined his second birth as the moment when he and Mo Spike had navigated past Checkpoint Charley in the white van. He didn't know what he would do if his present conditions didn't improve. Increasingly he thought suicide was a viable alternative. He thought it would serve whoever it was right to have to clean up his mess later. For the Brass, he thought that there would be repercussions for having a civilian suicide occur on their watch. At least double the paperwork. And perhaps even an inquiry or two that they'd be forced to attend at uncomfortable hours in the morning.

Killing himself was no mean feat, it turned out. As this was a place where:

- There was no access to firearms.
- There was no access to any precipitous drop beyond the communal kitchen table.
- There were no metallic knives, nor rope, nor even ceiling hooks from which an impromptu noose could be suspended.

Suicide-proof, you'd have to say. But it was unlikely that this was the Brass' intention when building what according to Franc Slate was a monumental structure.

"They don't give a flying fuck about you, and not a flying fuck about me," Franc said to George one day while rebooting his/her computer. "I mean, they didn't have personal safety in mind when building out shafts that descend miles into the ground. Lightless shafts probably without ventilation. They wanted control, freedom from inspection, not safety. Suicide-proofing came about as a result of oversight from civilian authority. It's not that they're against you killing yourself, it's just that they haven't given you permission to do it. Ultimately, suicide's too spontaneous, too personal an activity to be allowed to take

place. At least down here. It would indicate that you have a soul. And that your soul is unaccounted for in their index. There might well be a form for you to fill out that would allow you to do it. A *Permission for Suicidal Activity Form* (PSAF). There might well be an approved method for the act,” Franc said. “My guess is asphyxiation by plastic bag and duct tape. You walk off to the bathroom and do it. There’s no mess to clean up after that way and no screaming that would distract workers from their tasks. On the inside of the bag would be a bar code that could be scanned with all the form information included. The who, the what, the how. But not the why. The why never adds up for the Brass,” Franc said. “It’s not that they don’t want to understand,” he said. “It’s that they can’t. It’s not actionable intelligence after all. The *why* of any suicide. So they leave it off the form completely.”

Momentarily bereft of a lit cigarette, Franc Slate began to slowly search his/her person looking for the next one up.

“Where do you get those, anyway?” George asked Franc. “The smokes? You must buy in bulk. Is there a vending machine on the premises that serves those up?”

“Cigarette machines?” Franc Slate said. “The last cigarette machine I saw was I think at a bowling alley in 1992.”

“Where do you buy ‘em?” George Nunce asked. “Is there a commissary around here or something?”

Franc thought a minute before answering. “Sometimes at the local Walgreens,” s/he said to George. “Sometimes at the gas station

on the border of the Indian Reservation the shuttle passes through on the way into town.”

“*Into town,*” George Nunce repeated as if it was no new piece of information that was being communicated to him just then. “It’s in Utah, the town? Utah? Yeah?”

“Yes, it’s Utah,” Franc said. “Which for somebody in my condition,” s/he said holding his/her arms out, “you would assume is, to put it mildly, ironic. Is that the right word? Ironic?”

George Nunce didn’t know the fucking right word. Never had thus far in his short, nasty, and brutish life. Likely never would the way it was going.

He had a crick in his neck of late from his pillow of coke bottles. More distressingly he was out of the ovular blue pills that tethered him to the earth. He was having visions of terrible things daily due to their loss. He could make it through in this environment where the line between fantasy and reality was irrelevant for the most part. But this didn’t mean he was indifferent about their possession.

In Utah, as Franc had intimated, there were pharmacies. Unlike Franc, George didn’t give a fuck about Mormons and the shit they gave an outsider. If a Mormon ever said something to him, he would say something to him. He had always been like that: more or less: surly and indifferent.

More than this was the idea of any port in a storm. Look, the roads that led into Utah also led out. But Nunce was stunned that every person at this base wasn’t in the same boat he was. He assumed himself at this point a captive. But to hear Franc tell it this might not be the case.

Nunce inquired after the details of Franc’s daily trek into Utah. He was trying to be nonchalant, but the quivering in his voice gave away the deep interest he had in the subject.

Franc Slate said that s/he always believed George Nunce never left the Area because he had nowhere else to go.

“We saw you come in from the middle of nowhere unshaven and filthy,” s/he said. “So, we just put two and two together. Nobody I know has ever come in from the direction that you came from. We thought maybe you were a drifter or an illegal who had

just wandered in,” he said. “All of us around here are pretty liberal, thank God,” s/he said. “I mean, we don’t give a fuck about the military otherwise. So, you found a place to sleep and we let you sleep. We didn’t think you were here against your will, shit like that,” Franc said. “We didn’t think you had some place better to go. You looked for all the world like a person with nowhere better to go. No offense,” s/he said. “We can see it in your eyes, the sadness in your eyes. We can see that life is a burden for you, maybe. That there’s no respite from it. Not for you. Not recently anyway.”

Franc Slate told George Nunce that the Utah shuttle left every forty minutes after three pm at the far side of the building. S/he had no idea if George had the clearance to allow him to make his way over there. But it was worth a try certainly, wasn’t it? Just as before, George could keep a low profile. If he had a different set of clothes to change into, for example, that would be beneficial. And it wouldn’t hurt either for George to wash the grime from his face and comb his hair.

For the next three days George Nunce set to this project of transforming himself, as per Franc Slate’s suggestion, into something resembling an ordinary worker.

He had no change of clothes. But at night he soaked his t-shirt and jeans in the men’s room sink and placed them next to him to dry on the vinyl floor. As they dried, he kept himself wrapped in the mylar blanket and feigned a sickness so as not to expose his nudity. The second night he found a pair of scissors in a desk and cut his hair. Then, detaching the blades from each other, he sharpened one to an extreme point to shave with.

Nervous that such enhancements were insufficient, Nunce begged the use of Franc’s unisex Louis Vitton eye frames. He swore he would mail them back to him/her if he escaped. He thought the present alterations to his appearance wouldn’t be enough to fool the recognition programs. He needed something that covered up his face’s structure. He assumed wearing a mask or a scarf over his face would be flagged instantly. He assumed simply making funny faces the whole time he was walking wouldn’t be enough.

With the glasses on and his hair slicked backed he felt he could reasonably be an entirely different person than when he passed through Checkpoint Allen.

“Don’t scrunch up or shift your gaze from side to side,” Franc advised George when it seemed he was on the point of leaving.

"The computers track emotional states as well as facial structures," s/he said. "You just go about your business like nothing's out of the ordinary," s/he said. "I've got a chart that helps people do this. You keep your gaze steady but slightly downcast. And for god's sake whatever you do no sudden movements!" Franc said. "Do everything slower than normal to counter the adrenaline. And even if somebody strikes up a conversation you ignore him or her. Not until you're off the shuttle," s/he said. "Remember, Utah's Brass property too. Remember to come up with an escape plan for yourself even after you think you're free. Cause who knows how long their reach is? And who knows what they're capable of if they feel betrayed?"

"Thanks for everything," George told Franc and let his face drain of emotion. Then, slowly as he might, he made his way out to the main hallway he had walked through on his first day inside. Even after all his free time here he had never had the opportunity to see where it led. It was ten-minutes before he saw another person. Then after another mile and half he found himself surrounded by people he assumed as workers all headed in the same direction.

The shuttle itself was a non-descript bus parked underneath an overhang sticking straight into the mountain.

"Pardon me," George Nunce said when scurrying past others to sit in the last seat. He assumed this would be the most secure seat as it was furthest away from the driver. Maybe somebody would take a headcount or check for ID. The bus's emergency exit was padlocked but he still felt safe back here. He was shielded from direct view by all the other passengers. And he felt that if someone had entered the bus with a gun he could somehow get out through a broken window.

Nunce hadn't decided yet what he would do if somebody directed him toward the front. He hadn't decided if he was going to be compliant or make a break for it, risking severe injury.

He would let the moment decide. Which was an adequate procedure when processing non-urgent matters, but, when confronted with a dangerous situation, he could have done substantially better for himself than simply leaving it to an instant's improvisation.

Not yet two minutes after the bus was in motion, a burly man in a flannel work shirt rose from his seat and walked towards

George. The burly man's cellphone was holstered, and he had a Bluetooth microphone jammed in his right ear.

Likely he was going to try and throw Nunce from the moving bus and let the drones finish him off later. Here was one way to die among many out here. But, bereft of a true plan, George's only defense was to slump down in his seat. He would have been better off fashioning an impromptu weapon of some sort. It wouldn't have enabled his escape, but it might have given him the satisfaction of retribution for injuries incurred against him. He thought of revenge as the disenfranchised person's substitute for justice. It was better than nothing certainly. Whereas going into a situation naked was as good as nothing. He saw the error of his ways after it was too late.

Maybe George could lean against the bus's interior wall and kick at his attacker. Likely it would only make the burly man mad, but it was all he could think of now. Raised in bad neighborhoods, nevertheless, George Nunce had never thrown an effective punch in his life. He doubted he had it in him. His hands were too small. At least that was what his erstwhile father had always claimed.

Stopping one row before him, the man in the work shirt produced a folded-up paper out of his back pocket.

"New around here aren't, ya?" he said to Nunce. "I don't think I have ya on my list."

George Nunce found his voice just in time. "They didn't tell me nothing," he said. "I just walked in. They didn't tell me where I was supposed to go."

The paper in the man's hand was a sign-up sheet for the Girl Scout cookies his daughter was hawking. To pay for something. A trip to Washington, perhaps? Really couldn't say what. But the man figured he would be a good dad and help out.

"Only thin mints left," he said to Nunce. "Sorry about that."

George Nunce looked up at him. "Thin mints?"

Just then the bus hit something like a pothole.

"Shit," George Nunce said and signed his name. He had absolutely no fucking idea what a thin mint was. Was that military code for a cyanide capsule?

Chapter Thirteen: Emptiness (Shunya Mudra)



The first town they drove through was the village George had spotted last week on the pass road. It was a riot of fifties-style buildings and public works.

“Where are all the people anyway?” Nunce said to the burly man hawking girl scout cookies. The man’s name was Larry Rector, who, sensing Nunce’s flustered state, had sat next to him to provide him an orientation.

The only dynamic objects in this town were its traffic lights. But even these remained red an appallingly long time. And despite its traffic-less cross-streets, the shuttle’s driver seemed obliged to obey.

“They want you to think it’s on account of nuclear fallout,” Rector said staring into the living room of one roadside cape cod while the bus idled. “But it ain’t. In fact, the prevailing theory is that the government built the town as a distraction. To trick people into the notion of there once having been nuclear fallout. To get them to stay away.”

What they were hiding deep inside the mountain, Rector figured, was either so important that this subterfuge could be

justified in the black budget or so inane that they had to maintain the illusion of importance under all circumstances lest they be accused of burning taxpayer's money for no real reason.

"I'm betting on something like an enclosure of salamanders that once upon a time the military was trying to weaponize," Larry Rector told George. "They'd train these salamanders to be the army's eyes and ears. Then they'd let them out into the wilds of Nicaragua and Honduras. Of course, by 1967, let's say, the experiment proved a bust. But the line item in the budget remained. So, they were forced to re-classify them as ultra-top secret. This would discourage prying eyes such as a reform-minded congressman or an inspector general. So here we have it. The Area. Nobody to the best of my knowledge on this shuttle has ever been down there. Nobody knows the true purpose of either the base or the ghost town. Which is a triumph of tradecraft, at least according to them. They pulled the wool over everybody's eyes. It had to be done if you think about it. Because the things that really matter in this world are always inter-connected. Nothing that lies in the dark like this place and can ever be considered important."

On the ghost town's sidewalks, in fact, there were metallic cut outs of people placed at quarter-mile intervals with hats on their heads. These were in place to avoid detection by stray aircraft overhead.

"One old shuttle rider's job was to manufacture these," Larry Rector said to George and aimed a loogie out the window at a cut-out of a seven-year-old girl wearing an aluminum beret. "The hats specifically," he said. "So you'd assume that they, the Brass, had some intention of maintaining the façade. I mean, the Area's not about to go anywhere," he told him. "They're thinking it's here to stay for at least the next few decades. You'd assume they know what they're doing. I mean, they've screwed the taxpayer over for this long, not that I'm complaining, you'd assume they have sign-off up the chain-of-command. They've put us all to work doing all this meaningless bull crap for them. Only the salamander wranglers lose any sleep about their jobs, I guess. And they are at an extreme distance from the common working man. They're sequestered somewhere down below. Lord only knows about them. And heaven help them and their families. It's a darn shame having to live your life like that. For no good reason whatsoever."

George Nunce might on a lark come back to this Potemkin

Village and have a look around. Of Larry Rector, he wanted to know if it was on official property.

“Official property,” Larry Rector said as the last of the red lights were forded, “what the heck is that?”

“Clearances and the like,” George Nunce said. “When I came in, admittedly, from the back way...”

“For somebody like yourself,” George Nunce said, “it’s safe to assume that all property is ‘official property.’ You can’t really say how long their grip is. The Brass, that is. Maybe on this planet and all others. They have friends in high places,” Larry said, “or maybe they don’t. Officialdom’s a mindset, after all, as much as a legal entity. You assume that they go wherever they want to, take whatever they want, and reveal themselves only when it’s convenient for them to do so. As opposed to convenient for the People they serve.”

Speaking as he stared out the shuttle’s grimy window, Larry Rector seemed neither bitter nor incredulous about this situation. Merely he was grateful for the employment. To his very core he felt the Brass did not owe him an explanation about their exploits. He was grateful for his job which involved producing duck decoys in the wood workshop. He was a contended worker, but this didn’t mean he was entirely accepting of their ways. He felt that the shiftlessness that he suspected the Brass were guilty of was deeply immoral. He was a Mormon like so many others in this part of the country. Thus, he saw a strong correlation between a man’s actions and his prospects for salvation. He thought the Brass capable of great harm against others if they had become convinced that it was necessary to fulfill their ends. Even now twenty miles east of the mountain he felt their eyes heavy upon him.

According to Larry Rector, George’s story was not so uncommon that he would admit surprise at having heard it.

“They’d forget their heads if they weren’t attached to them,” Larry said of the Area’s managers. He recalled for Nunce all the times he had to counsel those he referred to as “stray dogs” inside the Area how to deal with their abandonment by an invisible power structure. According to Larry, George shouldn’t take the abandonment personally. It was just a symptom of a bureaucracy too bloated to operate in a non-absurd way.

The bureaucracy was aware of individuals but utterly unaware of itself. It was incapable of self-correction, therefore. It needed to

be reconfigured from the outside. But being largely invisible (“black”), that was impossible. Likely, even President Obama was unaware of this place, not to mention its inefficiencies and effronteries committed in the name of secrecy. It wasn’t any one person’s fault likely. Which made it nobody’s fault, actually. That is, if you didn’t believe in collective guilt. Eventually, Larry said, something would go click internally within America’s Hidden Power Structure and attention would be paid. Some data point would, upon lying dormant in a spread sheet for so long, mature and trigger an action. Which would trigger a second and third action which would lead to a creation of an email account in George’s name. Once an internal email account was created, Larry Rector said, you were officially onboarded. As every email account needed to be associated with a group or groups. And all groups reported to a certain manager with certain responsibilities and a higher degree of oversight than any lone worker. IT would have to give you a computer, for example, which would require a visit from IT, which would require an assigned workspace, which would require certain req. forms be completed by a certain manager. If these forms weren’t completed, the manager would hear from his or her director. But nothing went forward without that first email account. Logically it all should have been set up in advance. But it seemed a given person who at least knew of George’s presence had dropped the ball.

Soon George Nunce returned to his contemplating if the Area was even managed by people.

“It has that rote, mechanical feel to it. Don’t you think?” he asked Larry Rector as the bus crossed over into what felt like a new part of the world entirely. Presently actual people could be spied around what appeared as inhabited domiciles. There were dogs, not coyotes, spotted in the overgrowth. And there were telephone poles with telephone wires stretching east towards real civilization.

Larry Rector didn’t answer straight off as if this was the lone taboo topic in this place: its obvious algorithmic nature.

“Don’t have to be a robot to act robotically,” he said to George Nunce finally. “I mean, I think it only takes a slight inattention to detail to bring soullessness into reality. You give into what’s always been done, to superficial perception. And there you have it: a tin-plated pump where your bloody heart ought to be. But, yeah, I agree we can all do better out here. We can all treat each other a

little better even though there's no economic or military gain in doing so. I don't believe you've been out here long enough to realize the true span of it. The conspiracy against humanity by humanity, that is. Eventually you become just another robot. And then a guy like you happens along and you have no idea what is being talked about whatsoever."

The new town that the bus had entered was by Nunce's estimation, a real town, a utilitarian settlement in the desert developed through private capital. It was untidy in the way that all real things were untidy. Pink flamingoes on the weedy lawns and all that. There might have been municipal laws against barbequing on the sidewalk here, but nobody gave a fuck. In such places, people kept to themselves, sometimes out of respect and sometimes out of fear. Everybody here owned a gun. It was the American Way. If you didn't like it, you could move to Canada. Or better yet, commiefaggot, you could move to the North Pole, the no-man's-land of the world. There, you'd be free to impose your beliefs on your fellows. You'd be free to force your will on your neighbors to your heart's content.

If this town had a name, it was proving elusive to George. It had a name, likely, but George didn't give a damn what it was.

He never asked and it was never offered. The town was surprisingly large and verdant given the arid surroundings that it was situated in. It was a hundred and eighty miles to Salt Lake City, according to one of the few road signs George had noted on the way in. Probably this included a detour around the Great Salt Lake that, if memory served, was situated between this town and the Beehive State's capital. He wondered how much of the town's populous was transient, making their home in the SLC area fulltime and driving over here each Monday morning to hop the shuttle onto the base. For himself, Larry Rector never intimated where his permanent residence was located. But for some reason Nunce assumed this was the case with him. The town, at first impression, had a faded industrial nature to it that worked against a notion of permanent residency for a large man hawking girl scout cookies in his spare time to strangers. Rather, it seemed a place only social outcasts would make their home fulltime. There was nothing here that promoted a robust family life of the sort that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints was famous for cultivating. A lot of warehouses were spied on the way in, for example. These seemed in

the process of being converted into artist's loft spaces. The bar-to-church ratio stood in Nunce's estimation at twenty-to-one. This was a town for singles maybe, or men in committed relationships with their inner demons.

George Nunce was an outsider's outsider. There was no place in this world he would ever truly see as home (apart from the grave). But in a town like this he would not stick out as much as he might in, say, Ashtabula, Ohio. The fact that there were so many rootless people here set his mind at ease. He could go into a restaurant and sit in a booth alone and order easefully without being marked as a loner. There would be others assuredly in the restaurant just like him, alone and indifferent towards company. They would if they saw George at all assume him as somebody like them, a temporary Area worker come west temporarily. This town was not to be assumed as anybody's real home. And thus, so many things would be forgiven of its populous. Men lost their heads after all when cut off from family. It was not their fault. It was a natural aspect of being human, to go a little wild when alone. That's why there were families in the first place. To keep the lid on insanity. But in this town all services for child-rearing had been omitted. This was a midnight place between the Area and real civilization. It was pathetic that George should have felt so at home here, but there it was. Once the shuttle stopped, he waited his turn to disembark. He didn't say goodbye to Larry Rector as it seemed too forward a gesture for men who had only just met. Maybe he'd see him tomorrow or the next day. Anyway, he wasn't big on excessive gestures of politeness. You could say goodbye to a person anytime you wanted, after all, once in his or her presence. He didn't think it was any big deal letting go.

Chapter Fourteen: Hungry Ghosts (Preta)

The town had character in Nunce's estimation. It was a place he didn't mind being stranded in (though he remonstrated to the contrary to all who would listen).

"I'm not going back on the shuttle until they fix my credential situation," he told Mary Ann Conroy whose hair styling salon he had wandered into his first week here for no other reason than to talk to someone. Waitresses after all could take your order and move away from your table easefully if you were overly chatty with them. But a barber chair was perhaps the only place left in modern America where social interaction between strangers was encouraged. Nunce could talk and talk and not be seen as overly needy, overly desirous of a shoulder to cry on. Here he was merely fulfilling the role of a chatty patron. Barbers likely appreciated the type. It gave them a chance to cultivate a relationship with a customer. Over time the customer could become one of the shop's regulars that sustained it over a period of years. Something like a community would be formed around the shop. A man would be known by his barber in the way he used to be known by his priest.

That was all the social interaction left nowadays. As even your goddamned next-door neighbors didn't want to know from you.

According to George Nunce, refusing to work was a dignity/quality-of-life issue more so than any concern about the status of his email account.

"They think I'm a dope, somebody they can jerk around like a dog on a leash," he said to Mary Ann while she was trimming an eyebrow.

"I think I'm within my rights to withhold my services until they get their act together," he told her.

He was referring to the Brass.

"Well, they might never get their act together is the thing," George said. "Well, that's OK with me. The other day I sublet-ed a place just above the bus station. It's a month-to-month lease. Which means I can hang out here just as long as I need to. They owe me for eighty hours already plus all the overtime I'm due," George said. "I already made an invoice up and emailed it to them," he said. "I'll wait another week for a response before I send it again. I figure I have three more weeks at least before I make up my mind about moving back east. I don't mind it here," he said, "wherever this is. It reminds me of places I been to before. Something more midwestern than western," he said. "Old style. It's been a railroad town, I figure. But for the life of me I can't find the railroad around here anywhere."

To the best of Mary Ann Conroy's knowledge, the railroads had bypassed this town completely. She had never heard a train whistle in her life. She wouldn't know what to do if she saw a train approaching. She supposed she would honk and wait for good fortune to strike.

Indeed, here was a city that shouldn't be. Devoid of natural resources or an advantageous position relative to transportation, it served no discernable need except to offer temporary shelter to Area workers. And this was enough to explain the warehouses that looked to have dated back to the 1920s. Large brick structures, they contained enormous windows on all sides that served as ventilation and air-conditioning systems. Presently they were all re-purposed. But this didn't explain why they had been built in the first place. Industry surely would have relocated north, following the railroads. If there had been any agribusiness in this part of the world a hundred years ago, it would have been a surprise to the likes of

George Nunce. He was sure that he was ensconced in desert for four hundred miles on all sides. He dreamt of desert nightly, in fact. The desert had infiltrated his soul as its dust had infiltrated his orifices. He was a part of it and always would be until the day he died.

The old village was completely dependent on the Area to the west. To George, this meant that the Area was far older than he assumed it to be. No Cold War artifact merely, the enormous base must have predated World War Two. And perhaps World War One as well.

Hearing Nunce speak of such matters, Mary Ann Conroy was put in mind of the local POW camp in the shadow of the Rubys.

"My father used to be a guard there," she said. "Big place. I mean, it went all the way underground. There were enormous underground tunnels that they made the prisoners dig night and day. Nobody knew what their purpose was. They went far deeper than any bomb shelter according to dad. I think it was against the Geneva Convention or something, making them work like that. So they kept it a secret until the end. It's all my dad talked about even after the war, these tunnels. He thought it had something to do with the secret project in Los Alamos. He thought there was something deep inside there that the military wanted. But it was too secret to tell the guards. Or even the camp commandant anything about it."

Mary Ann said that after the war of course the prisoners were repatriated, and the MPs discharged. But she was sure the work in the camp continued.

"We been out here since 1950, the year I was born," she said to George Nunce of this seemingly nameless town. "I remember it always just like it is now. There was shell-shocked GI's home from the war who wanted a life away from people. The Brass built them homes out here, gave them preferential treatment for their troubles. Dad liked the elk hunting in the mountains. But he was always spooked by that prison camp and the Area beyond the pass. He didn't think it had anything to do with this town. But I think he was wrong about that."

No city history could be located by George at the public library. Nor, apart from the library staff, a functioning municipal government of any kind. According to the librarian, this village was classified as a Beehive Township. This brought it under county jurisdiction. It was just a vacant spot on the map, government-wise. The cops and the fire department were under county control. The

ambulance service was a private ambulance service paid for by a federal stipend. In fact, the land the town was built on was federal land. Nobody knew why this was or if it was expected to change soon. Nobody knew really if it was something worth fighting over.

The building that dominated all others in the town was an enormous, shuttered factory. It was situated on a bluff on the town's outskirts.

"Where's the infrastructure providing ingress and egress?" Nunce asked the man who amounted to this blank town's local historian. He was a vagrant named Mike Cole. "I mean," George said, "you build something like that, sixty thousand square feet, with an eye towards logistics, do you not? This road here," he said to Cole pointing to where they were striding uphill, "was never paved. And even if it was it was never wide enough. Imagine two fully loaded semis trying to pass each other on this goat trail and then you see the problem I'm having trouble imagining it," he said. "Bootleggers might have built a distillery in such a place to avoid detection," he said. "But a reputable businessperson would demand easeful ingress and egress. They'd want a modern four-lane road built at minimum with access to the interstate."

According to Mike Cole, this factory's products were classified as a government secret. This was along with the factory's workers who were shipped in from someplace else for the decades it was in business.

"The prevailing opinion is that they were prison camp internees," Mike said and readied a hand-rolled cigarette that he had just fashioned. "We'd see 'em being trucked in each day on military vehicles up this same road," he said. "A lot of Japs certainly amongst their ranks and some Germans it looked like. They were blindfolded so it was hard to tell," he said to Nunce. "But all we knew was that they didn't want to be there. Looked like they were going to their deaths up the road each day even though they likely knew better. The blindfolds, I'm guessing, were to keep them from making contact with the locals. They needed to keep them in the dark about the progress of the war maybe. Maybe make 'em believe they were still POWs in an ongoing conflict. From a capitalist perspective, after all, there's nothing like slave labor. I imagine you'd get addicted to it over time. I imagine once you're in possession of such a workforce you'd do everything in your power not to let them go."

When the factory had closed the workers vanished with them. And lord knew what had happened to them. As ever there were conspiracy theories. Cole's favored theory was that the workers were herded into a deep tunnel one night and buried alive. The Brass might have felt that it would not be enough to merely kill these men. They would have to destroy any evidence of their presence for all time. So ordinary execution and cremation wouldn't suffice. Rather, their murder would need to be something Poe-like and untraceable. They would need to be able to deny the existence of every stray hair from every prisoner.

These were New Western stories Mike Cole was unravelling. As distinct from tales of the Old West, these New Westerns were yarns emanate from a place haunted by too much government presence rather than too little.

"Shit like that happens because they're scared shitless of the people under their control," he told Nunce of the Brass' behavior. "If they weren't so scared it would be easier to cover-up. But then they wouldn't have the motivation to do so," Mike Cole said.

"Out here really is where all the American casualties from the Cold War reside," he said. "In the federal lands. From southern Utah north they are here. It's the greatest crime in human history. It all happened in this area. It was undertaken to shield the mainstream of America as much as possible. They didn't want people to know what was going on exactly. And they still don't. The average American don't even know this part of the world exists."

The eastern part of the Beehive State was for tourists and Mormons mostly, according to Mike. But drive fifty miles west of the Great Salt Lake and you enter a no-man's-land. It's not really part of America or part of the world. Everything misses it. The railroads, for example, are routed through southern Wyoming, not here. And the danger in not realizing a place exists makes it fertile ground for creepy-crawlies. Bugs of the mind. Even the goddamned director of the CIA doesn't know everything that goes on in the northwest quadrant of Utah. The various files on the place have never been organized. They had never been declassified to the point that they could be read formed and into a single narrative by one person. Bits and pieces of an information/disinformation binary merely are floating through the hazy soup of what has come to be called the Deep State. The Cold War may be over, but its secrets remain buried. Nobody knows enough to even ask the questions, let

alone find the answers. Everything was a mystery. And mystery fermented conspiracies. It's where all myth came from likely, this inability of ordinary people to obtain accurate information concerning their immediate environment.

Around the factory perimeter a barbed wire fence had been placed. The fence was surprisingly rust-free as if this was the lone object on the slope that the government had an interest in maintaining.

"If you want," Mike Cole said, "I can borrow a pair of bolt cutters. We can crawl inside and smash a window. And see what there is to see on the other side."

Nunce soon realized that what he would find inside was evidence leading him to a greater mystery. He saw nothing good would come from the adventure.

"Any more fucking around," he told Mike, "and I'll be in this godforsaken place the rest of my life. And, let's face it, if there's something they didn't want us to see they'd have hidden it a little better than this. You and I would be dead by now likely if we had come upon it. I've seen the Brass in action from up close. I know that they can keep a secret for a long time."

A scrap of wind-blown paper was sticking to the outside of the fence. Soon the paper folded open as if it were being manipulated by an invisible hand.

There were strange runic symbols on the paper's inside. To George Nunce, it seemed a bit of ancient language perhaps conveying an ancient truth. Nunce for his part had no desire to translate the passage. He assumed the primary mystery once decoded would merely open to a secondary mystery. The truth of whatever had happened at this place had long since expired. It was as dead as the men who had built it.

Nunce had bought a six pack of hard cider on the walk up. Now he and Mike Cole leaned against the fence and drank them in the obsessive way of a terminally ill patient sucking at the latest miracle elixir offered to him. Once a bottle was emptied, it was tossed against the blackened glass windows of the factory. He should have bought a twelve-pack considering the speed with which the six pack was downed. Forty minutes tops and they were all gone. And neither of them had much of a buzz as a result.

Something was alive in the bushes nearby. It was watching them.

“Fucker, watch this,” Nunce told the creature and threw the last empty bottle in its direction. He and Mike Cole laughed. Then they started back down the muddy road toward the nameless town.

George was getting internet installed today in the room he rented. He didn’t want to be late for the appointment.

Chapter Fifteen: Transition (Unmani Mudra)

This all occurred in the second half of 2014. Here was a year Nunce would recall with neither fondness nor pointed scorn.

Rather, it was just a single page in a dreary, repetitive book. It was noteworthy only in that it added to the book's excessive weight. If he could, if his own mind allowed him to do so, Nunce would skip whole chapters of the book to get to the end. Never a life affirmer, he was, nevertheless, determined to get to the end. If only because he had made it this far already and wanted to be rewarded for his efforts.

He thought of himself as a passive reader, indifferent to the wonder or surprise that a well-constructed story offered. 2014 was not like 2015. But in Nunce's mind, the differences were to be conflated and dismissed. His boredom and disinterest in life was so self-willed that it became a creative act. He could be raptured into heaven and admit neither gratitude nor surprise at the occurrence.

Merely, he would stare up at God's cycloptic eye and blink. Then he would ask Him what was for dinner.

Upon the arrival of the first snow to northwest Utah, Nunce made up his mind to leave town, reasoning he could just as well walk around with cold damp socks back East as here.

"Just to Tremonton on the other side of the lake," he said to an eastbound trucker at the Flying J Plaza he had chatted up when asked how far he was going. "According to the internet, they got a bus terminal in Tremonton with direct service to SLC," he said. "They got a Motel 6 there with free HBO in case you miss your bus and have to stay the night."

He had offered to pay his way onto the idling semi, but the trucker, last name Joat, would have none of it.

"For all I know you're Christ returned here to test my faith," Joat said to George and opened the passenger-side door. "It's five hours anyway depending on the condition of the road. I will not be condemned forever unto the Outer Darkness simply for refusing an offer of an afternoon's companionship. I will not overlook the gift of the Celestial Kingdom merely for being prideful enough to turn away a stranger in need."

Those blue plastic flowers glued to the dash of Joat's Kenworth were Forget-Me-Nots. Which, according to him, had a specific meaning in Mormonism.

"Forget not that He who created and knows the stars also knows your name!" Joat explained and lightly punched the roof of the truck's cab. Now on a northeast path on a two-lane highway, they seemed to have entered a place Nunce might have felt was Utah Proper. The federal lands to the west were a memory at this point. Now they were back in a familiar western terrain of sparse populations and religious mania. The relief George felt at this state of affairs overwhelmed his present sense

of dislocation. He had no idea where he was heading beyond Salt Lake City. Ohio was out definitely as he actually felt less at home there than the nameless town he had just left behind at first snowfall.

To Joat, Mormon religious teaching was no collection of Christian dogma and science fiction-y speculation. He believed it was the utter revelation of the way things actually were. He was a True Believer, in other words, to use the parlance of a former age. His faith was unshakeable as it had long since supplanted every skeptical impulse within him. This could not have been accidental. The spiritual lobotomy must have been self-administered. Nobody's faith could be that perfect naturally. He had the great gift that allowed a drive towards obliviousness. Even Church elders couldn't dissuade him from his chosen path. Assuredly they wouldn't try, but they couldn't. Joat was the perfect man. He was somebody bound for the Celestial Kingdom regardless.

Not that it mattered to George, but it soon became clear that Joat was less a church adherent than a man craving a direct experience of the Mormon God.

"From the outside," Nunce said to him gently, "the faith of Joseph Smith doesn't seem to have room for mystics."

In a plastic jar between the Kenworth's seats Joat had strips of homemade venison jerky. He invited Nunce to partake of them.

"I'm not really concerned about all the rules and regs," he said to George concerning his visionary zeal, "so much as the truth. That's what John Lennon said, didn't he?" Joat told George. "He said 'Just gimme some truth.' Well, same as me. The only difference: I know the truth. Poor John never did. He died too soon to ever be evangelized successfully. Whereas I was born and raised in the bosom of the one true church in the midst of the great Beehive of the World."

Throwing out matters relating to tithing and the wearing of the temple garments which non-believers seemed (inexplicably) to fixate upon in regarding LDS matters, Joat thought that it was in the gaining entrance to the Celestial Kingdom where the Latter-day Saints' faith would be justified.

"If you're faithful to your spouse in this life and all other LDS

precepts, you can become a God unto your own planet,” Joat said to George and turned to face him. Mildly distressing, this maneuver. As the Kenworth was going eighty-five on an icy two-lane road at the time.

Well, if Joat wasn’t worried, George wasn’t worried. He assumed true believers like this won a karmic free pass in this life regardless of their beliefs. He had seen the effect close-up with several devout relatives who seemed exempt from paying taxes, for example. Or in one case attending high school in contravention of existing truancy laws. These True Believers did what they wanted and assumed everything would work out all right. And for them it had. Mostly. Perhaps the fates were too cowed by the extremeness of their manias to fuck with them. Instead of the jackbooted heel of the law coming down on them, they usually wound-up doing themselves self-harm. One day they woke to find that God had abandoned them. And that was it. But for a man like Joat that moment was far away.

According to Joat, God, *the* God, was once a man just like him. And one day Joat could become a God just like *the* God. Yes, in the Celestial Kingdom it was all possible. And therein resided the real reason for believing at all.

“In your own heaven,” he told Nunce, “you can do whatever you like. Scratch whatever you like, create whatever you like, and make up the rules as you go along. Think of that for a minute,” Joat told George. “Think of who it is you’d be allowed to touch with impunity. Of what sort of fourteen-year-old naked sylph you’re allowed to sit on your bare knee and nuzzle on the back of her neck. In your own heaven, friend, it’s not merely possible but likely. Consider all that I’ve told you and consider that it all might be true,” he told George. “And then think for a moment about why you think I’m strange for donning the vestments of my religion. Mormon marriages in this life are generally torture for both parties,” he said to George. “Everything in the earthly realm is or should be performed with an eye towards the celestial realm,” according to Joat. “Nothing matters in the present moment. Which I’m assuming

is a sentiment a drifter such as yourself can get behind a hundred percent.”

Not so interested at all in Nunce’s recent personal history, the why’s-and-wherefores of how he had come to this desolate place so much as expounding upon his own delirious spiritual journey, Joat grew more expansive.

“I did time in Colorado once,” he said to Nunce, who wasn’t surprised by the admission. “This was before my rededication to the Church.”

Nunce looked up from his jerky stick. “Time? For what?”

“Statutory rape,” he said. “Also,” he said, “ordinary rape as well.”

“But now you’re better,” Nunce said. “Now you’re snug in the bosom of the Lord.”

“When I get to the highest heaven,” Joat said to Nunce, “the planet deeded to me. I’ll re-make God and bend Him over and shove a steel dildo up His prolapsed asshole until He expires from the pain. Yes, a steel dildo sixteen inches long covered with barbed wire. I’ll say ‘that which you’ve done to me I now do to you.’ I’ll smile at the sight of His suffering. As He had in all likelihood smiled at the sight of mine. It’s simply a matter of redress, of the gaining of justice in life. And the gaining of justice I think is the most noble pursuit of all.”

The town of Tremonton, Utah, even when they were in its midst, proved nearly invisible to George Nunce.

“Just a bunch a buildings thrown every which way like plastic Monopoly pieces,” was the way Joat described it.

“Well,” George said as he disembarked from the Kenworth, “I’m not complaining. Civilization’s civilization, anyway. But, on the other hand, it’s hard to witness for somebody who expected much more. Probably when the bus comes around, you’ll have to flag it down. Probably they have orange flags in the motel that they use for this. And the driver should be conscientious enough to slow down and take a look.”

In Mormon Heaven all these problems would be solved.

“You’re worried about such things because you’re unsaved,” Joat told Nunce as he watched him scramble across the dirt road towards the Motel 6. Interestingly, the road that was dirt in town was paved both before the city limits and after. That’s when you knew your town was small. Truth be told, even the sheep found

Tremonton provincial. But good news for Nunce was that he wouldn't be hanging around here very long. The bus to the big city was due within the hour. It was exquisitely good timing. And once he caught sight of a legitimate highway overpass, he would feel relieved. He thought a slightly dangerous, deeply annoying part of his life had been finished with. He felt able to turn a page somehow. But he was not home and never would be. He had been infected mortally with strangeness. It would never be the same again.

Chapter Sixteen: Busy Bee! (Bharamara Mudra)

That first night in Salt Lake City, Nunce located the cheapest motel possible within walking distance of the bus terminal and used the establishment's computer to check his email.

Subject: Sorry for Everything You've Been Put Through

To: George Nunce

Body: Dear Mr. Nunce,

We have recently been made aware of your unsatisfactory term of employment while at a Nevada facility. We have received your letter of complaint and, rest assured, we are

investigating. Please be aware that it is our intention to remit all monies owed to you. Hopefully, you have already been paid in full.

Sincerely,

**Hon. Robert Nathanson, Deputy Assistant
Deputy of the Department of Defense, Human
Resources**

In fact, days prior to him heading east, a not insignificant amount of money had been directly deposited into George's checking account. Presently every penny owed had been accounted for, including the expenses that he had claimed. Even though he had not submitted any proof so much as a receipt, the expenses were approved. Which in a way was extremely generous. But in another way, such approval was rote and unenlightened. The Brass was taking the easy way out, but George had no intention of looking a gift horse in the mouth. */Before that deposit he had less than three hundred dollars in the account. He thought this money was just deserts for the way he had been treated.

Nunce slept on the slightly gooey carpet of the SLC motel the first night. As he had grown accustomed to a hard surface underneath him from his time out west. In the morning, where he had expected a bill from the hotel, he had opened a note handwritten on typing paper:

**Hola! This is the
dream you are in
the midst of. You
went to sleep "back**

there.” You are not awake!! Not even close pal!!

Delicately Nunce folded the letter into eighths. He walked into the john and threw the letter into the toilet. He aimed his morning urine at it then watched intently as it was flushed. He didn't think about who had written it or mailed it. It didn't concern him. He wouldn't investigate the note's allegations. He didn't care about truth.

That morning he walked back to the bus station then bought a ticket to Grand Forks, North Dakota. Yes, Grand Forks. He always wanted to see the Grand Forks. He had always wanted to witness its awe-inspiring might for himself.

But when he arrived at the park that housed the rivers' confluence two days later all was blanketed in snow. So, he resolved to wait out the winter in Grand Forks. Rent was cheap there. Also, a refinery on the town's outskirts was hiring. He thought three or four months there at the most and he was onto another place. He wasn't inspired by travel so much as horrified by stasis. North Dakota was in its way as dreary as the desert of Nevada. It was featureless and frigid. It was a sort of imagined purgatory for him yet experienced daily in vivid detail. A place for surviving and little else. No poetry had ever emerged from North Dakota's confines. All longing in North Dakota was focused on being someplace else. There, even the grouses sang love songs to Texas, their winter home.

He was convinced of his need for wanderlust. But when the wooden door in his basement was finally noticed, George Nunce made the calculation that this was his sixth year in Grand Forks and fifth year in this house. He was deeply puzzled about why he hadn't noticed the door until now. Not that he had ever spent much time in this basement, but he assumed a feature this unique might have caught his attention at least once. The landlord from who he rented

this house hadn't pointed it out on the initial walk through. It might have been hidden under a bit of carpet. Maybe that workbench of the landlord's, now in the corner, was disguising it.

Hard to say how the door had been so overlooked since George had moved in years back. Perhaps the door was none of his business. Thus, he had put it out of his mind immediately.

Usually, the basement was dark. The single bare light bulb in the basement served merely to illuminate the stairwell rather than the basement's webby interior. Shadows were thrown in daylight hours. So, it might have been that the shade cast by the house's furnace was sufficient to obfuscate the wooden door's presence. That was the story he told himself anyway. He had no paranoid theory at the ready to otherwise explain its presence. He didn't believe the landlord had installed it while he was at work. He didn't believe that it magically appeared in an instant as an invitation to further mystical adventure.

Shit like that didn't happen in Grand Forks. No, the mystical adventures out here were always self-conjured, resultant mostly from booze drinking or prescription painkiller swallowing. There was a nasty opioid problem around these parts to hear the local media tell it. Nasty meth problem too. But this was the way it was everywhere in America. Apparently. You couldn't blame the bad weather native to these parts for it solitarily.

This door in the floor like every door in the floor was an invitation to be opened.

"Fuck that," George Nunce said to himself upon discovering it and walked upstairs to bed. He realized he was being seduced by mystery. He moved against the effort readily. At least on this night he wasn't so cheap. He would get to it on his own time certainly.

Those days he watched a lot of TV. Truth be told, he lost his job at the foundry because he watched a lot of TV. Which was another way of saying he didn't give a fuck about work. He was made for better things, he felt, than toting frozen earth from one motherfucking hole to another.

While in Grand Forks, he had a brief relationship with a waitress named Louanne. Louanne left him over this aforementioned behavior, his excessive television watching, his

avoidance of work, and his tendency to shut himself up in his rented house for days at a time dressed only in white-tighties, watching the snow fall. Also, his vodka drinking. George Nunce loved vodka. He loved it unadorned by a flavorful, salubrious mix like orange juice or lemonade. Days when there was nothing better to do, or when the snows prohibited unnecessary travel, George would sit in his white-tighties in front of the TV taking pulls from the bottle. Vodka, you see, was utterly clear and bracing. It was as a dive into the icy water emanate from a mountain spring. It was a true *libation*, which was a word with certain religious meaning. Its consumption was the opposite of decadent behavior as far as he was concerned. It was health food, really. And the more George Nunce drank, the healthier he became. Soon he wouldn't need food or companionship at all. He liked his new life apart from others and the insect-like click, click, clickety-click of commerce and "self-betterment."

He would be a new man when he finally tried that door: softer, whiter darker inside, a little bit meaner despite his alleged spiritual evolvment through vodka consumption. The

door would open for him he was sure because he would have prepared himself in advance for its revelations. In hero narratives such as his, this was the way it always was. The hero needed to prepare himself for receiving the holy truth and saving humanity. He would suffer greatly. Then his blood would spill onto the barren earth and render it absurdly fecund. His seed would spill soon after that. And up from the black ground would sprout a hundred blood nourished fruit trees. Hero trees, you might say. But it was only possible when the hero was soft and white inside. He, the hero, was the worm at the bottom of the mescal bottle. You could bite his head off and receive the buzz. Then become a hero and perpetuate the cycle *ad infinitum*. Supposedly.

No one else could ever be admitted through the wooden door. Since this door was made only for him.

“Well,” he said to himself one evening crouching over the door dressed only in whittie-tighties and flip flops and tried the knob. It was coldly metallic in his hand.

On the knob’s rose was an ouroboros decoration. Holding his flashlight over it Nunce thought this last detail too much. He had vodka in his coffee mug and had placed the mug down for this. He had thought the situation was overbaked and gooey at once.

The door opened like a hatch and forced Nunce into the standing position briefly to secure it.

“Well of course,” he said and stared at the set of spiraling stairs going down inside the passage that was revealed. He had vague hopes that there would be no mystery to it. Maybe there was a refrigeration unit inside of it of the sort used for storing autumn-

culled moose and elk. That would have made sense in this part of the world. Maybe upon opening the door a pair of antlers on a decapitated cervine head would have stared out at him. It would have certainly set his mind at ease. For just as thresholds invited stepping through, stairs invited transit. No person would upon viewing these stairs would hesitate walking down them. They were seductive as Venus. Especially while you were drunk. Especially when there was not a damn thing in the world left for you to lose.

As expected, eventually he had lost the flickering light of the basement bulb and had to rely on his flashlight. Then around thirty flights down the staircase the flashlight failed.

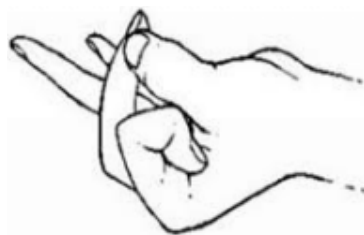
And he began to float.

The matches from the Bluebird of Happiness diner, Dover, Delaware were long since exhausted, long since expired in the service of a former life.

Blind as he was, George had vague notions of descending, of being still in gravity's pull. He couldn't ascertain exactly whether this was so. He was bereft of a fixation point, you see. He couldn't tell if this easeful floating was in fact a death plummet.

A man with a German accent and a bowl cut at a certain disembarkation point approached George and asked after his equipoise.

"Listen, bub... "George Nunce said and made a fist. But it quickly and involuntarily formed itself into a strange and uncertain mudra:



"No, *you* listen," said the man in English and flipped a switch. At which point everything became known to him. There was this silver flying saucer crammed into the darkness awaiting boarding. And he, George

Nunce, apparently was its solitary passenger.

THE END